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Thinking Out Loud

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Sippur

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‘What is good tone? It’s heartfelt and musical. It’s generally a fat tone . . . When it comes to acoustic guitar, I’m trying to pull a lot of tone out of the guitar!’

JOHN LEVENTHAL, p. 28

Features

14 Magnificent Mentor

How Guy Clark helped cultivate the new Nashville (an excerpt from *Without Getting Killed or Caught: The Life and Music of Guy Clark*)

by Tamara Saviano

18 Raising Sparks

Guitarist Tim Sparks lends an acoustic flourish to John Zorn’s avant-jazz project

by Mark Ari

22 The Life Acoustic

David Crosby tells his story—from the Byrds to CSNY to his latest solo album—through the prism of his guitars

by Mark Kemp

Special Focus: The Quest for Tone

28 Tips on Tone

15 players share their strategies in the relentless pursuit of an ideal sound

by Greg Cahill

Miscellany

9 The Front Porch

37 Holiday Gift Guide

81 Marketplace

81 Ad Index

January 2017

Volume 27, No. 7, Issue 289

On the Cover

Guy Clark

Photographer

Señor McGuire



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CONTENTS

Bourgeois L-DBO, p. 72



SETUP

10 Guitar Talk

For the price of a bottle of cheap wine, Donovan learned the clawhammer from 'Dirty Hugh'

12 The Beat

An interview with Guy Clark's biographer; IBMA names the best in bluegrass; Johnny Winter's guitars sold at auction; Bob Dylan wins the 2016 Nobel Prize for Literature

PLAY

40 Here's How

Apply yoga to your guitar playing

42 The Basics

Acoustic rock: Brush up on your arpeggios

44 Woodshed

How to play musically

48 Weekly Workout

Playing bass on your six-string flat top

SONGS

54 Thinking Out Loud

Learn to play the popular Ed Sheeran song that borrows from an R&B classic

56 Colours

Here's the correct way to play a mid-1960s classic by Donovan

58 Sippur

A Tim Sparks arrangement of a Klezmer-inspired John Zorn piece

AG TRADE

68 Makers & Shakers

UK luthier Roger Bucknall of Fylde Guitars finds his muse in his high-profile clientele

70 Ask the Expert

The chilly weather can bring potentially harmful low humidity to your home (and guitar), but there is a fix

72 Review: Bourgeois L-DBO

A little guitar that delivers an authentic old-school sound—and much more

74 Review: Martin GPC-15ME

A modest guitar well-suited to a myriad of musical styles

76 Review: Ovation

50th Anniversary LTD

Relaunched icon marks a milestone with a limited-edition gem

77 Review: G7th Performance 2

Building on a classic capo

82 Great Acoustics

A high-flying Kel Kroydon model

MIXED MEDIA

78 Playlist

Bob Weir scales *Blue Mountain*; also, John Prine returns with *For Better, or Worse*, his long-awaited second set of duets; Courtney Hartman of Della Mae has plenty to say on her impressive solo debut, *Nothing We Say*; Hot Club of San Francisco dishes up the Fab Four on *John Paul George & Django*; Jim Lauderdale revisits 11 classics on *This Changes Everything*

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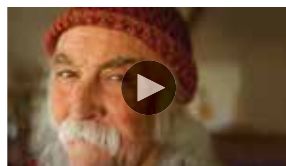
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Video Exclusives



BILLY BRAGG & JOE HENRY Fresh from a transcontinental train trip that resulted in the album *Shine a Light*, this folk duo shares tips on how their choice in picks and other techniques shape a fat tone.



DAVID CROSBY

Offers a tour of his acoustics



TIM SPARKS

Performs John Zorn's 'Sippur'



AG SESSIONS

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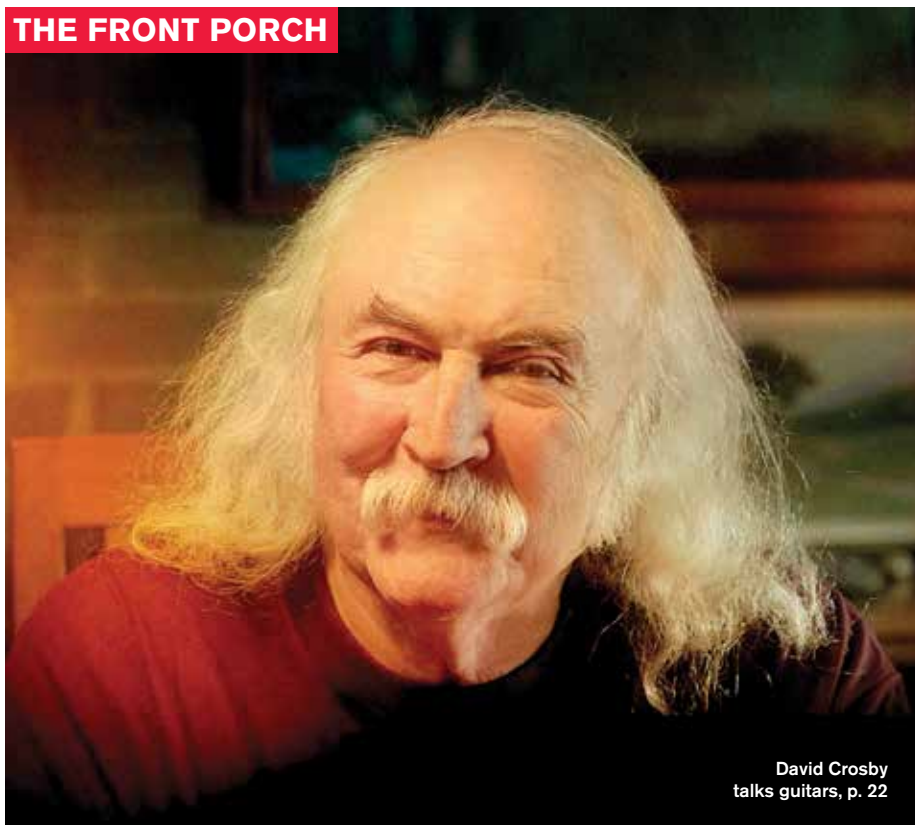
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THE FRONT PORCH



David Crosby
talks guitars, p. 22

DJANGO CROSBY

I don't collect the way other people do. Some people collect rare guitars, like, 'I have a '54 Strat worth \$50,000.' And I don't collect the way [Graham] Nash does: Nash has Duane Allman's guitar and Johnny Cash's guitar. I bought guitars because they sounded good," David Crosby once said. "I played them, they sounded unbelievably good, and I couldn't resist."

Crosby has had a long and storied career. As a member of Buffalo Springfield (briefly) and the Byrds, he helped shape the folk-rock sound and gave Bob Dylan his first success as a songwriter. Together with Nash and Stephen Stills, as well as Neil Young, he fashioned a heavenly harmonious sound that became the blueprint for countless Americana bands.

And his trials with substance abuse, run-ins with the law, and the recent break up of CSN&Y have been tabloid worthy.

Recently, he released *Lighthouse* (Decca), a solo-acoustic album that provides shelter from his personal storm.

Senior editor Mark Kemp caught up with Crosby at the pop star's home in Santa Barbara County to discuss . . . guitars.

Namely, Crosby's collection of acoustic guitars and how they have served as signposts in that storied career. You can read it on p. 22.

Elsewhere, you'll find an excerpt from *Without Getting Killed or Caught: The Life and Music of Guy Clark*, Tamara Saviano's new book about the late singer, songwriter, guitarist, luthier, and boat builder. Bob Doerschuk interviewed Donovan and came away with a colorful Guitar Talk about one of the British entertainer's most bizarre guitar lessons. There's an Acoustic Classic featuring the music and lyrics to Donovan's "Colours," as well as charts to Tim Spark's arrangement of the John Zorn avant-jazz composition "Sippur" and British folk-pop idol Ed Sheeran's "Thinking Out Loud."

Editor-at-large Jeffrey Pepper Rodgers provides a lesson on playing bass on your six-string acoustic, Adam Rafferty tells how to play more musically, and Gretchen Menn gives a lesson on brushing up on your rock basics (arpeggios, to be precise). I talk to 15 expert players about how to get a fatter acoustic tone. And you'll find news, gear reviews, and much, much more.

Play on.

—Greg Cahill



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CONTENT DEVELOPMENT

Editor Greg Cahill

Senior Editor Mark Kemp

Managing Editor & Digital Content Editor

Whitney Phaneuf

Editor at Large Jeffrey Pepper Rodgers

Production Manager Hugh O'Connor

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Publisher and Editorial Director

David A. Lusterman

FINANCE & OPERATIONS

Chief Operations Officer

Anita Evans

Bookkeeper Geneva Thompson

Accounting Associate Raymund Baldoza

Administrative Coordinator Leslie Cohn

General Inquiries FrontDesk@Stringletter.com

Customer Service

Help@AcousticGuitarService.com

Advertising Inquiries

Marketing.Services@Stringletter.com

Send e-mail to individuals in this format:

FirstName.LastName@Stringletter.com

Front Desk (510) 215-0010

Customer Service (800) 827-6837

General Fax (510) 231-5824

Secure Fax (510) 231-8964

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12

The Beat
A revealing new
Guy Clark biography

13

The Beat
Bob Dylan wins
Nobel Prize for Lit

13

The Beat
IBMA honors
best in bluegrass

SETUP

Donovan would eventually master clawhammer and teach it to John Lennon during the Fab Four's trek to Rishikesh, India. Lennon would use it on 'Dear Prudence.'

GUITAR TALK



JAC. DE NIJS / ANEFO · NATIONAAL ARCHIEF

A True Teacher

For the price of a bottle of cheap wine, Donovan learned the clawhammer from 'Dirty Hugh'

BY BOB DOERSCHUK

A half century after launching his career as a folk-rockers and pop star, Donovan is still a rambling man. And he's still performing the bewitching ballads he wrote as a young bard—"Catch the Wind," "Colours" (see p. 56 for music)—as well as "Hurdy Gurdy Man," "Season of the Witch," "Mellow Yellow," and other gently hallucinatory brews of jazz, rock, and folk. Last fall marked the 50th anniversary of his breakthrough LP *Sunshine Superman* (Epic) with a tour through North America, in which he played solo while seated cross-legged on a sheepskin, much as he did in the fabled '60s. He took the time to recount his folk roots. "At 16 and 17, I wanted to come whizzing out of Bohemia and invade popular culture with meaningful lyrics and ideas of social change for a world that was clearly mentally ill," he says. "I wanted to sing about that."

Donovan chased this dream to St. Albans, the epicenter of British folk music. With only rudimentary guitar chops, he figured that this would

be the best place to elevate his playing. But that proved harder than he had anticipated.

"All the pickers there were slightly older than me, so they had the styles and I needed to know them," he says. "One of those styles was the clawhammer. But nobody would show it to me. In those days, you went to a folk club, you sat on the floor and you looked up at Bert Jansch, John Renbourn, and the guys as they were playing onstage. Some of them, when they saw I was looking, they'd turn their hands away and say, silently . . ."

Here, with amused delight, Donovan whispers, "F*** off!"

"Or they'd give me the finger because everybody was very cagey about what they knew. There was all this stuff of, 'You ain't gonna learn from me. I had to learn the hard way, so you learn the hard way, too.'"

It took an almost magical encounter for Donovan to unlock this fingerstyle technique's secrets—Donovan would eventually master clawhammer and teach it to John Lennon during the Fab Four's trek to Rishikesh, India. Lennon would use it on "Dear Prudence" and other songs. But Donovan's initial encounter with clawhammer happened one Sunday afternoon in a public park near the city's cathedral, cemetery, and crumbled Roman ruins. "All the young people were sitting on the lawn and playing cheap guitars when this guy walked in—very tall, with a long beard and long hair, wearing a long coat," he recalls. "Somebody

identified him as 'Dirty Hugh.' And he was dirty! He'd been sleeping rough on the road while hitchhiking around the country, so the smell that was coming off him was incredible!

"But then he sat down, opened up his guitar case and there it was: a Martin dreadnought. 'Nobody in St. Albans had seen a Martin before. He took it out and started playing flawless clawhammer style. So I went up to him and said, 'I'm Donovan. Will you teach me the clawhammer?' He said, 'I can see that you really want to learn this, so, yeah. Meet me tomorrow morning in that graveyard over there. And bring a bottle of wine.'"

At ten the following morning, Donovan showed up as commanded. He returned the next day and the day after, too, for hours of instruction from his mangy mentor, whose real name turned out to be Mac MacLeod, but whose mysterious if pungent persona suited him better. "He told me, 'It's a pattern. It begins like this: thumb on the fifth string. At one point, you won't know what to do because your brain won't be able to tell you. But I'm going to show you very slowly.' He went through the six parts of the clawhammer. After the third day, he said to me, 'You've got it, but your playing sounds like a mechanical toy. After a while you'll be playing more easily with three fingers and thumb. Then you'll develop that into two fingers and thumb; your third finger will be standing by to make your own patterns according to each song that you're doing.'"

"This," Donovan concludes, "was a true teacher."

AC

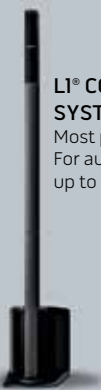
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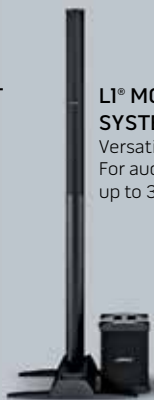
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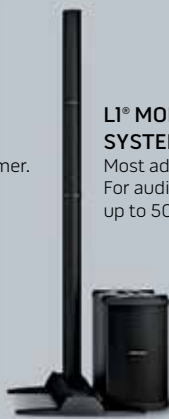
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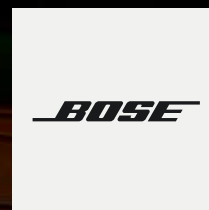


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Guy Clark



SEÑOR MCGUIRE

This One's for Him

A new Guy Clark biography reveals what drove the late Texas singer-songwriter

BY KAREN PETERSON

Guy Clark lived life as he wanted to live it, a decision made when he was a young man and that played out relentlessly until his death last year at age 74. A new biography, *Without Getting Killed or Caught: The Life and Music of Guy Clark* (Texas A&M University Press), reveals what drove the fiercely independent Texas singer-songwriter (read an excerpt on p. 14).

"He didn't give a rat's ass about what people thought of him—he didn't care about being judged. He was comfortable owning his dark parts," says author **Tamara Saviano**. The Nashville writer and Grammy-winning producer quickly learned how to relate to Clark, a man whom many found intimidating. "He liked people who didn't kowtow—who stood up to him," Saviano says.

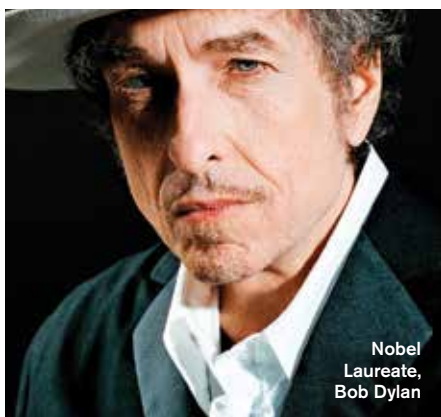
Clark was at peace with his past and present selves—owning his penchant for cigarettes, drugs, and alcohol. ("He really

believed in the ethos that drugs and drinking made you more creative," Saviano says.) So honest in his discourse about his life, "he practically cut his veins and bled on the table," she adds of the reminiscences—and skeletons—that tumbled out over the seven years and hundreds of hours she spent with the famed troubadour, first as his biographer, later as his publicist and producer of the 2011 Grammy-nominated *This One's for Him: A Tribute to Guy Clark*. Saviano is currently working on a documentary based on the biography.

The result is a bio without boundaries, much like Clark himself. His life was full to the brim with tumult and joy, and he brought those deeply felt emotions to his music. "He was always a humanist," says Saviano, adding that his music honored people and how they lived "in the here and now."

When the project began, Saviano assumed the focus would be on Clark's celebrated influence as a songwriter and his recording career, and it is, of course. Yet as Clark peeled away more of his layers, Saviano quickly noted a third—and key—element: His complex relationship with his beloved wife, Susanna, who died in 2012, and with the haunted, addicted songwriter **Townes Van Zandt**, his best friend and Susanna's "soul mate," who died in 1997.

For Saviano, the biggest takeaway from all that she learned was discovering the pivotal moment when Clark "dug in his heels to be who he became": the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963. "He never voted after that, he was not religious," Saviano says. Any pretense of following societal strictures ended. It was then, she said, that "Guy broke away from the idea that he had to be who he was 'supposed' to be. He became his own man."



BOB DYLAN AWARDED NOBEL PRIZE FOR LITERATURE

Singer-songwriter **Bob Dylan** has spent decades spurning his reputation as the voice of a generation, but on October 13 the Swedish Academy in Stockholm announced that it had awarded the 75-year-old artist the Nobel Prize for Literature. True to form, Dylan remained silent for two weeks before contacting the Nobel Prize committee to acknowledge the honor.

It was the first time the academy had recognized a performing songwriter in the literature category. Among the Dylan songs cited were "The Times They are A-Changin'," "Blowin' in the Wind," and "Chimes of Freedom."

The academy praised Dylan for "having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition," especially his anti-war protest songs and civil-rights movement anthems.

The academy's permanent secretary, Sara Danius, compared Dylan to such ancient Greeks as Homer and noted that the Greeks often performed poetry set to music. "Bob Dylan writes poetry for the ear," she said. "But it's perfectly fine to read his works as poetry."

Not everyone was convinced that Dylan deserved the accolade. Scottish novelist Irvine Welsh, the author of *Trainspotting*, reacted angrily to the announcement, firing off a series of short rants on Twitter. "I'm a Dylan fan, but this is an ill-conceived nostalgia award wrenched from the rancid prostates of senile, gibbering hippies."

Dylan has been accused of plagiarism on a number of occasions, most notably for his use of material from the Christopher Seymour's *Yakuza Diary: Doing Time in the Japanese Underworld* and Civil War poet Henry Timrod. David Kinney's engaging 2014 book *The Dylanologists: Adventures in the Land of Bob* offers a spirited defense of those charges, saying that such use constitutes post-modern, literary Dadaism.

At press time, Dylan was expected to accept the award on December 10. —Greg Cahill

BEST IN BLUEGRASS

Earls of Leicester took home the top prize—Entertainer of the Year—at the 27th Annual International Bluegrass Music Association Awards, held in Raleigh, North Carolina, in September. It was the second consecutive Entertainer of the Year win for the bluegrass supergroup featuring **Jerry Douglas**, **Barry Bales**, **Shawn Camp**, **Charlie Cushman**, **Johnny Warren**, and **Jeff White**. The band was also recognized in three solo categories: Dobro Player (Douglas), Bass Player (Barry), and Banjo Player of the Year (Cushman).

Flatt Lonesome, a bluegrass gospel band formed by siblings **Charli Robertson**, **Buddy Robertson**, and **Kelsi Robertson Harrigill**, earned three trophies—Album, Song, and Vocal Group of the Year. Additional winners included **Bryan Sutton**, Guitar Player of the Year; Special Consensus featuring **Rob Ickes**, **Trey Hensley**, and **Alison Brown** performing "Fireball," Instrumental Recorded Performance of the Year; **Junior Sisk** and **Ronnie Bowman's** "Longneck Blues," Recorded Event of the Year; **Frank Solivan & Dirty Kitchen**, Instrumental Group of the Year; and **Mountain Faith**, Emerging Artist of the Year. In addition, the late flatpicking whiz **Clarence White** was inducted into the Bluegrass Hall of Fame. —Whitney Phaneuf

JOHNNY WINTER GUITARS SOLD AT AUCTION

When **Johnny Winter** died in 2014, he left a legacy of powerful blues rock. Fans who wanted even more to memorialize the Texas guitarist jumped at the chance to bid on more than 600 of his personal belongings, auctioned by Guernsey's on September 30 and October 1. The Johnny Winter Collection included 30 guitars and a surprising number of acoustics: a 1930s **National Style 4 Tricone "Chrysanthemum"** sold for \$30,000; a one-of-a-kind **Terraplane**, which has a "Johnny" cutout with red velvet inlay on its body, sold for \$12,000; a 1930s **National Style O Hawaiian** resonator sold for \$6,000; two "Highway 61" resonators by **Republic Guitars**, a single-cone fetching \$2,000 and an older model—bearing a serial number of 00001—selling for \$2,500; a 1960 **Gibson J-45** sold for \$4,000; a '40s-era **Gibson six-string** sold for \$1,700; an **Eko Ranger XII 12-string** sold for \$950; a **Martin Backpacker** travel guitar sold for \$600; a **Les Paul-autographed Kay acoustic**—jokingly signed by the jazz-guitar legend "Now ya got a Les Paul" on the front of the body—sold for \$600; a cigar box guitar gifted by builder **Jerry Zybach** sold for \$450; and a **Yamaha** travel guitar sold for \$450. A custom-made metal slide, created by **Tony Whelan**, also sold for \$450. Check out all the auction items at guernseys.com. —W.P.

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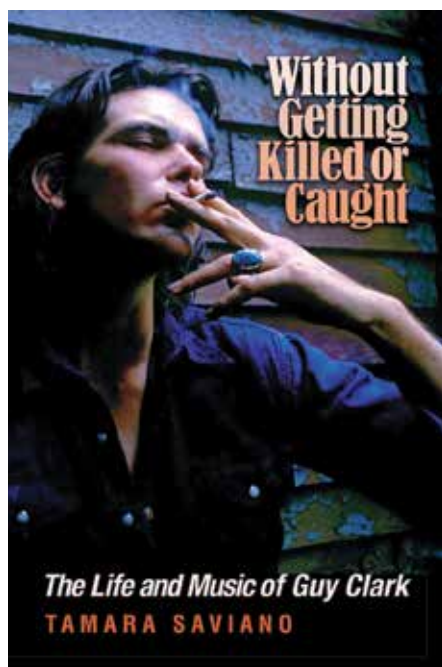
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MAGNIFICENT

New book explores the ways singer-songwriter Guy Clark helped cultivate Nashville's neo-traditionalist movement

BY TAMARA SAVIANO



This article is excerpted from chapter 9.

Editor's note: Tamara Saviano spent seven years with Guy Clark researching her new biography Without Getting Killed or Caught: The Life and Music of Guy Clark (Texas A&M University Press). Saviano worked as a publicist for Clark, a singer-songwriter, guitar maker, and boat builder who died last year of lymphoma (read an interview with her on p. 12). This excerpt describes his songwriting ethic and captures Clark's generous spirit as he helped to cultivate the New Traditionalist movement and inspire such influential Americana artists as Steve Earle, Emmylou Harris, Lyle Lovett, Ricky Skaggs, and Dwight Yoakam.

On September 17, 1985, a story in the *New York Times* announced the death of country music. “The audience for the Nashville Sound—lovesick laments, tales of marital strife, and other plain-spoken lyrics, sung with a rural twang, and often accompanied by arrangements more redolent of Las Vegas than of Southern cotton fields—is dwindling, growing old along with its favorite stars.”

Country music was changing. Artists with large crossover appeal ruled mainstream country radio. Kenny Rogers, Alabama, and Hank Williams Jr. led the pack. The country-politan era was over, along with the *Urban Cowboy* craze. Even Nashville's favorite outlaw, Waylon Jennings, was selling half as many records.

The old guard was dying, and it was anyone's guess how things would shake out on Music Row. Guy Clark quit the country music business and practiced singing his songs in front of a mirror in his basement. He wanted to get back to the basics of putting the lyrics out front. He wanted his poetry to come first, worked to improve his fingerpicking, and designed his own combination flat pick and thumb pick. “He's missing part of his thumb. He cut it off with a band saw, either in the shipyard or something. This corner of his right thumb is gone,” Nashville songwriter Verlon Thompson says.

Booking agent Keith Case, a fan since Jerry Jeff Walker recorded “L.A. Freeway,” pursued Guy as a client. “I was knocked out by Guy as a songwriter. His images are so strong, like short

NT MENTOR



Friends indeed:
Guy Clark, left, and
Townes Van Zandt

GUY CLARK COLLECTION

films that paint a vivid picture of Texas back in the time when he lived there. I wanted to work with him, and he's one of only two artists I chased down to sign."

Case booked Townes Van Zandt, too, and sent Guy and Townes on the road together, just the way they did it back in Houston.

The troubadours flipped a coin each night to decide who would take the stage first. Sometimes they'd join each other on songs. Whatever they felt like doing on the spur of the moment, they did. Case also booked Guy on solo-acoustic tours. He went out and played shows by himself, singing his songs and playing guitar with no backup, as he did it in the old days in Houston. Guy traveled to Texas for a run that included Dixie's Bar & Bus Stop in Austin and Poor David's Pub in Dallas. He played across the river from Washington, DC, at the Birchmere, where a critic likened Guy's songs to the film *The Last Picture Show*.

While his records were largely absent from music stores and radio, Guy made a name for

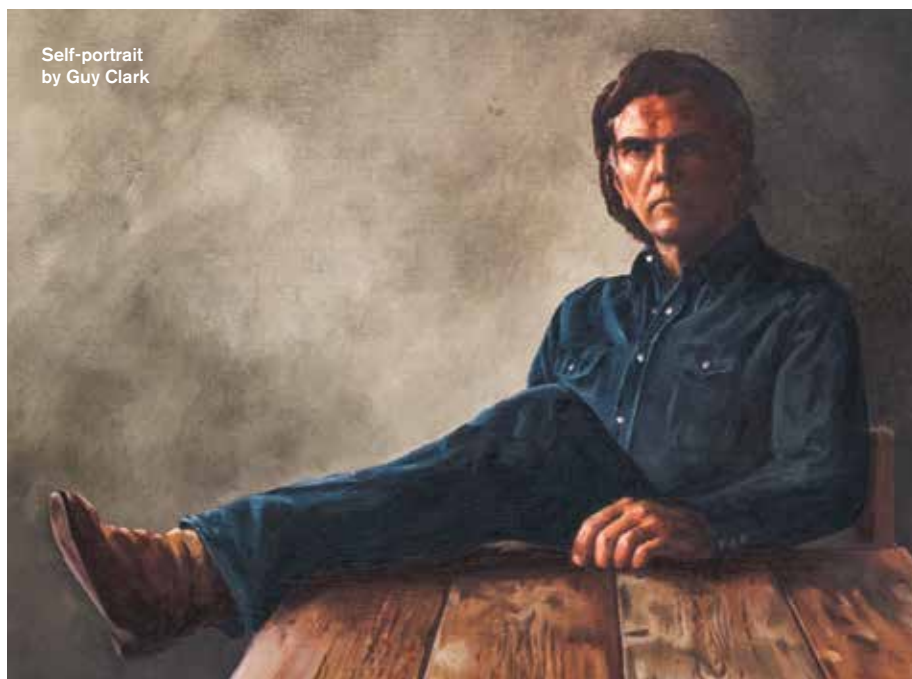
himself with his songs. CBS Songs acquired Sunbury Dunbar, and Guy still had his publishing deal. He was obligated to turn in a set number of songs each quarter, but it wasn't the quota that made him stick around. All Guy wanted to do was write songs and be around other songwriters.

The Highwaymen, the supergroup of Johnny Cash, Willie Nelson, Kris Kristofferson, and Waylon Jennings, took [Clark's] "Desperados Waiting for a Train" to No. 15 on the *Billboard* Hot Country chart in late 1985. Ed Bruce and Lynn Anderson recorded Guy's "Fools for Each Other." John Conlee scored a big hit with "The Carpenter," and Johnny Cash covered "Let Him Roll." Vince Gill's "Oklahoma Borderline," cowritten with Guy and Rodney Crowell, reached No. 9 on the chart. Gill was just getting his feet wet as a songwriter, and Guy was a tremendous influence. "To me, he is a painter," Gill says. "His lyrics are familiar to me because I came from that part of the country, too. I can see oyster shell roads . . . all of those things are so real. Every word matters, and you don't waste words. 'They're bound for the Mexican Bay of

Campeche, and the deckhands are singing *adios Jole Blon*.' That is poetic. God, it just rolls off of you so well. There are no words that are uncomfortable. One of the greatest lessons to try to learn from Guy is how to find a common sense yet elegant way to say it. The visual side of those songs [is] what completely annihilate[s] me."

Another Okie, from the small town of Binger, landed in Nashville as a staff writer for CBS Songs. Verlon Thompson met Guy at the office. They became cowriters and friends after Thompson brought Guy a song he had started called "Indianhead Penny."

"That's when we started having fun, or I did," Thompson says. "I had mentioned that idea to several people, and nobody thought it was worth messing with. Guy immediately grabbed his paper, just like that. What impresses me is the way he uses fewer words to give you more images. With two or three words, you get a complete visual idea in your head about the character and the setting and what's going on. That's what I love about his writing. It's the economy of words. One of the



Self-portrait
by Guy Clark

'There's no judgment in Guy's songs. He writes with a great deal of care about everyone, but he doesn't give anybody a free pass either.'

EMMYLOU HARRIS

songs that I think illustrates that is 'The Last Gunfighter Ballad.' Man, if you listen to that, it is a three-minute movie. Everything is there."

Rodney Crowell and Rosanne Cash had moved back to Nashville, and Emmylou Harris followed them after her divorce from Brian Ahern. Harris continued to release critically acclaimed albums on the Warner/Reprise label, and Guy and [his wife] Susanna attended Harris's album release party for *The Ballad of Sally Rose*. For the first time, Harris cowrote (with Paul Kennerley) all of the songs on the album. All along, Guy had encouraged Harris to write her own songs. "At one point, I had a song that I never ended up finishing," Harris says. It was a song about a woman—kind of like "Your Good Girl's Gonna Go Bad." The idea was that she was going to get even with this guy, but it was obvious that he was the villain of the song. We were working on it, and at one point Guy said, "I don't like to write songs where everybody's not equal." He's very democratic. He doesn't want to pin the blame on anybody. He sees the whole story leading up to it and beyond. We're all human, and we all have our faults. You can't say, "You win and you lose." That really impressed me. I went back and thought about all of Guy's songs and characters he writes about, like "Let Him Roll" and the prostitute that the old guy was in love with. It's just a sad tragedy of two people who maybe could've found happiness. There's no judgment in Guy's songs. He writes with a great deal of care about everyone, but he doesn't give anybody a free pass either."

Guy had attended or played the Kerrville Folk Festival in Texas every year since 1975. Rod Kennedy, who had owned the Chequered Flag (later Castle Creek) folk club and had founded the Zilker Park music festival in Austin, started Kerrville in a 1,200-seat auditorium in the small Hill Country town. Within a couple of years, the festival group purchased 60 acres of land outside of town and named it Quiet Valley Ranch. By the 1980s, more than 20,000 people descended on the ranch each May and June to take part in the 18-day festival. Kerrville attracts roots musicians, songwriters, and fans from all over the world. Songwriters are revered, and many of today's most respected writers played at Kerrville before everyone knew their names.

At Kerrville in 1986, Guy ran into Lubbock native and multifaceted artist Terry Allen, who became a close friend. "I recall meeting Guy, and then memory fades fast after we met, but it was at Kerrville at the folk festival at the YO Ranch Hotel," Allen says. "He was in the lobby, and we were both taking the shuttle to the stage. Guy had played, I think, the day before and was hanging around for his check. I was playing the next day. We hit it off in the van, just talking to each other, and ended up hanging out. Peter, Paul and Mary were playing, and we were a little too close to the stage and a little too rowdy because the guy that ran the thing got really, really pissed off at us. We were drinking a lot and carrying on a lot. It was all his fault, pretty much.

"There was a full moon that night. It's like thousands of hippies out there, stoned, just

listening to 'Puff, the Magic Dragon.' There was a moon, and one cloud came out of nowhere, and, just like a claw, it covered the moon. For some reason, Guy and I got so tickled seeing that, and we fell apart on the side of the stage. Peter and Paul were very upset with it, but Mary, she laughed at us. I was basically banned from then on. We just had a real good time that night and then sort of crossing tracks over the years. Every time we saw each other we got friendlier."

The Ballad Tree is a beloved tradition at Kerrville. Each weekend during the festival, a songwriter hosts a song swap under a sweeping live oak tree on a beautiful piece of the ranch called Chapel Hill. The same year he met Terry Allen, Guy hosted the Ballad Tree and spotted a young writer named Buddy Mondlock. "I had seen Guy play at a place called Holstein's in Chicago, and I was just blown away," Mondlock says. "Like you've heard a million times, the first time someone hears Guy Clark do a set or hears one of his records, it's like, 'Oh my god, this is the best songwriter I've ever heard.' I was particularly struck by that line in 'Old Time Feeling' about an old gray cat in winter staying close to the wall. With a few words, he just nailed the complete spectrum of feeling."

Mondlock signed up to sing at the Ballad Tree so he could meet Guy and maybe shake his hand. "A bunch of people played and I was toward the end and I played a song called 'No Choice.' Afterward, I was just kind of standing around talking to a friend, and I saw Guy Clark walking in my direction," he says. "I was looking over my shoulder to see where he might be going, and he stopped in front of me and said, 'Hey, I really liked that song you just played. Do you have a tape of that?' I said, 'Well, yeah. I do. That's my tent right over there. Don't move, I'm going to go over and get you a tape.' I came back with a cassette I had done earlier that year on a friend's little four-track. It had that one and a couple other songs on it. I thought: That's the coolest thing that's ever going to happen to me. Guy Clark is going to listen to a song of mine, and he liked what I sang. I went on with the rest of the festival and had a great time. Kerrville just blew my mind, too. It was a great place to be and it was a perfect fit for me.

GUY CLARK COLLECTION

"I went home, and a week later I was coming into my apartment in Chicago with a basket full of laundry. I could see this little light blinking on my answering machine. I hit the play button: 'Hey, Buddy. It's Guy Clark in Nashville. I really liked your song, and I liked the other ones, too. Give me a call sometime.' Holy shit! After I got done doing backflips in the kitchen I called him, and we talked for a minute. He said, 'Well, what do you want to do?' I said, 'I just want to keep making music and writing songs and trying to figure out how to make a living and a life out of that.' He said, 'OK, well, let's see if we can get you in the music business.'"

"I heard him at the Ballad Tree, and he was so good I just kept my eye on him," Guy says. He wrote some great songs. 'The Cats of the Colosseum' is about the Colosseum in Rome that is in disrepair and full of cats. Buddy writes about the kids playing music at the Colosseum in the middle of the night. And I thought that was so good."

As Mondlock sent him more songs, Guy made mix tapes of Mondlock's work and began to pass them around Nashville. He handed out tapes to music publishers, folks at the

performing rights organization ASCAP, friends, and anyone he thought should hear good songs. In turn, Nashville music executives began to call Mondlock, starting with producer Jim Rooney.

"He was one of the first people that called me, and he said, 'Hey, Guy Clark gave me this tape, and I thought it was really interesting. What are you up to?' I told him I was just starting to tour and playing clubs in Chicago," Mondlock says. "Jim said, 'Well, I'm coming up to Chicago. I want to go to a Cubs game. You want to go with me?' So Rooney and I had a great afternoon going to see the Cubs play in Chicago. A little while later, Bob Doyle from ASCAP called me. Bob said Guy had given him a tape, and on that particular tape was a song I wrote called 'The Kid,' and that one really struck Bob. We talked a few times, and finally he said, 'Well, do you ever think you might come down here to Nashville?' I said, 'Well, yeah, I've been thinking about it now. I never used to think about it before.' My picture of Nashville was just this stereotypical Dolly Parton and rhinestones and all that stuff. I didn't really feel any affinity toward that commercial Nashville glitz. That was my impression of Nashville, so I thought there was nothing for me there. But Bob said,

'Well, you should come and check it out. It's a really cool place, and songwriting is really what it's all about here more than anything else.'"

Doyle offered Mondlock his spare bedroom. On Mondlock's first trip to Nashville, he signed with ASCAP, visited Guy over at CBS Songs, and was introduced to Emmylou Harris at a reception at the Country Music Hall of Fame. "It was just so cool. I was like a kid with my eyes wide open," Mondlock says. "I met all the people at CBS Songs. It's just this little house with a few offices and writing rooms in it, really homey and comfortable, and Guy was there, and everybody's being nice. I thought it was really cool. I remember watching Guy do a demo session in the little basement studio next door.

"It was not at all what I was picturing Nashville to be."

Tamara Saviano is the producer of Beautiful Dreamer: The Songs of Stephen Foster, which won the 2005 Grammy Award for Best Traditional Folk Album. She is also former managing editor of Country Music magazine and produced the 2012 Americana Album of the Year, This One's for Him: A Tribute to Guy Clark.

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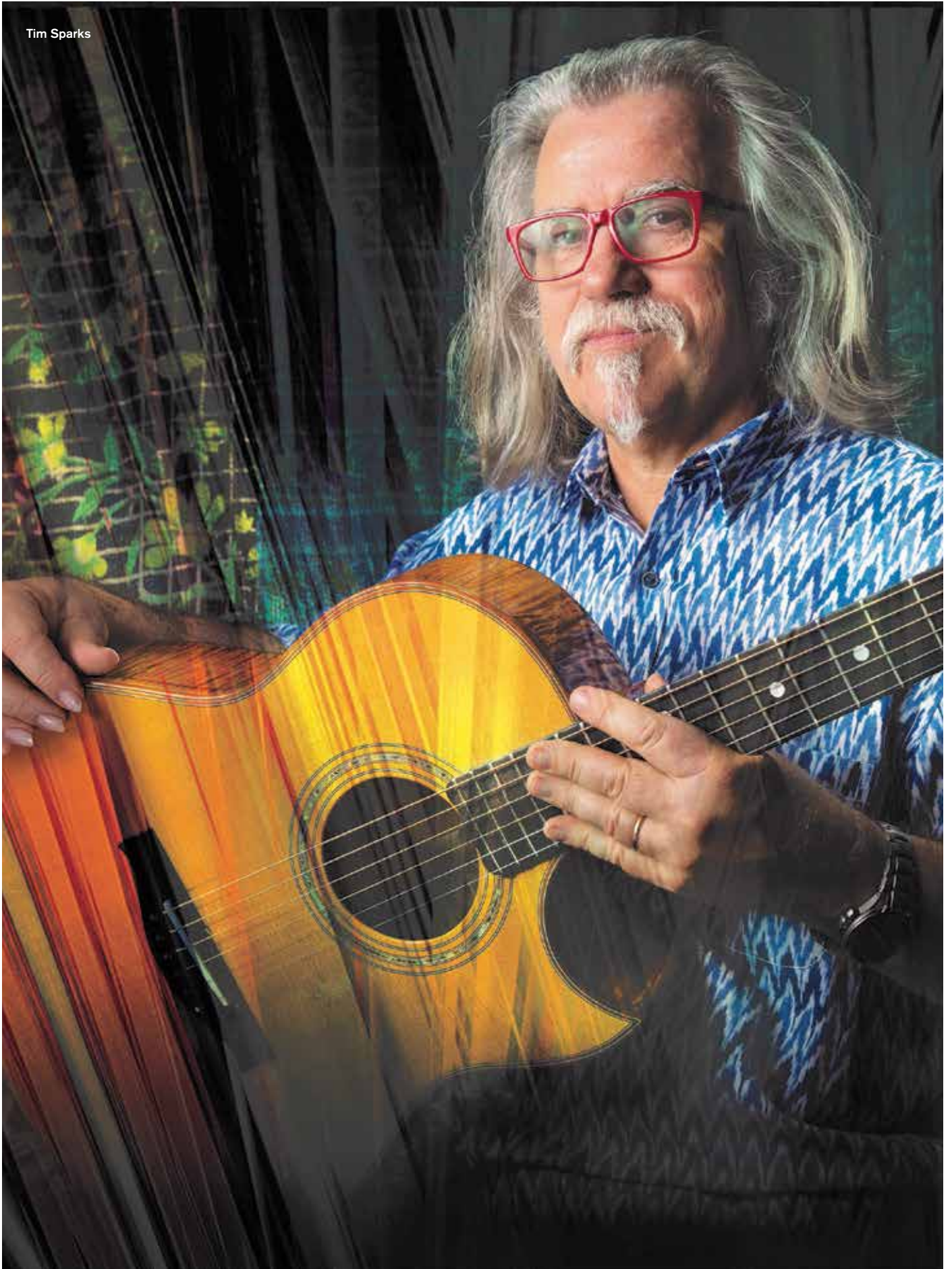
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Tim Sparks





RAISING SPARKS

Tim Sparks lends an acoustic flourish to John Zorn's landmark avant-jazz project

BY MARK ARI

In 2003, the acclaimed avant-jazz recording *Masada Guitars* came out on John Zorn's Tzadik Records label. It was the first album in a series commemorating the tenth anniversary of the pioneering saxophonist's *Masada* songbooks. Zorn tapped fingerpicking champ Tim Sparks—along with guitarists Marc Ribot and Bill Frisell—to deliver the tunes in arrangements pared down for solo guitar.

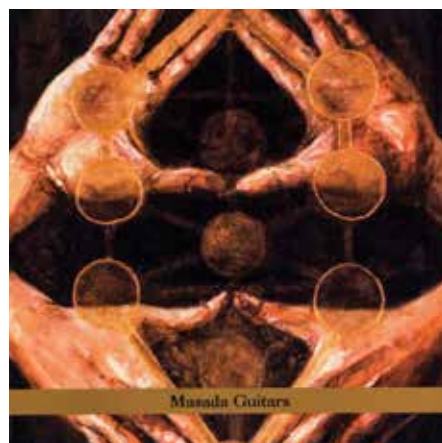
"Zorn encouraged me to be completely eclectic in my approach to the tunes," says Sparks, who recently revisited the *Masada* works as part of a new performance series featuring musicians who have recorded for Tzadik. "He wanted me to play the way I played, using whatever I wanted."

For Sparks, that means bringing his own mix of Southern cultural traditions and other styles to Zorn's twist on Jewish music. Sparks had first learned blues and "moonshine gospel" from his paternal grandmother, who played piano in little churches in the Blue Ridge Mountains. Then, with a scholarship to the North Carolina School of the Arts, he studied classical guitar under Jesus Silva. At 16, Sparks met fingerstylist Duck Baker. "He really blew my mind," Sparks says. "He was playing everything: Frank Zappa, Sun Ra, Coltrane, Irish/Celtic music, ragtime, Jelly Roll Morton. Totally eclectic. I was also very influenced by Lenny Breau. He played flamenco really well. He played Chet Atkins' style really well. He played jazz. He could play this amazing harmonic stuff. He crossed all those boundaries and mixed them up. That's kind of my bag."

It's a mixed bag that brought Sparks to the attention of Zorn, a pivotal figure in New York City's adventurous downtown music scene since the 1980s. For Zorn, the *Masada* project began as a personal answer to what Jewish music is. He's called the pieces "sketches" to inspire creation. Combining Jewish musical scales, odd meters, and supple, lyrical melodies with the brazen assurance of Ornette Coleman's free jazz, each tune provides opportunities for musicians to bring their own backgrounds and influences to bear (see the music to Zorn's "Sippur" on p. 58). The tunes, short and meant to be played by small groups of musicians, have proved extraordinarily

malleable, finding expression in interpretations that range from Afro-Cuban party music and guitar-driven math metal to the elegant chamber-jazz of Zorn's own string trio. Still, they retain their singular character—what Sparks refers to as the soul of the music.

"I was part of Zorn's Radical Jewish Culture series," Sparks says. "In my case, it's very radical. I'm not Jewish. I'm a redneck from North Carolina. But I made this journey from hillbilly to playing Jewish music, because what



'I'm a redneck from North Carolina. But I made this journey from hillbilly to playing Jewish music, because what I like is music with soul!'

TIM SPARKS

I like is music with soul. When I made my first record for Zorn [Neshama, 1999], I was learning Mizrahi tunes, or tunes from Yemen or Dagestan, as well as Klezmer and Sephardic tunes. I was picking out songs from all over the Jewish Diaspora, which is so vast. It touches on so many different types of music. It has this integral continuity because those scales go back to cantorial music, yet there are all these connections to other styles. A flamenco chord can beautifully express a Klezmer scale. In blues, you bend the note to get the real third

that you want to find if you grew up with real intonation rather than the tempered intonation of western music. You find the same thing in Klezmer and Middle Eastern music."

Making connections is at the heart of *Masada*. Zorn encourages musicians to cross borders and range broadly. There's an emphasis on fusion. He never defines Jewish music, yet Zorn's framework is intensely Jewish.

The first book of the *Masada* project is comprised of 205 tunes. The second, *Book of Angels*, has 316. The *Book of Beriah* is the final collection and will comprise 92 pieces when complete. That's 613 tunes, the traditional count of biblical mitzvot in *The Torah* (the five books of Moses). While mitzvot is generally translated as "commandments," the word might be better understood from its root word, "tzavata," which means "connection." Each mitzvah is a way to connect with the spiritual realm. In some Jewish thought, based on Lurianic Kabbalah, the world is broken and can be restored only when the divine spark that resides in every splinter of it is raised up to the spiritual realm and reunified with it. That's what a mitzvah does. It raises a spark as part of the work of Tikkun Olam, repairing the world. It's an ongoing, evolutionary process.

The way Sparks describes working on these tunes, it appears the player is raised up, too.

"When one is composing on the guitar, it's a simple matter to create phrases that ergonomically address whatever fretboard obstacles arise. However, when you tackle an ambitious arrangement like the *Masada* pieces, you inevitably expand and stretch your technique and understanding of the fretboard, because you have to figure out those gnarly passages that defy your comprehension of what is playable on the guitar."

The *Masada* tunes are collaborative. Zorn chooses musicians from his ever-expanding coterie, but he lets them find the tunes they want to work on. "He faxed me a whole bunch of charts and said pick whatever you like," Sparks says. "Ever since I did that recording of *The Nutcracker Suite* [Tonewood Records, 1993], I've been into odd-metered songs. 'Sippur,' for example, has really unusual rhythms. The A section is in 11/4, and the B section is in 4/4."

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TIM SPARKS



Masada
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To figure out a thumb pattern, Sparks studied Greg Cohen's bass line on the original Masada Quartet recording for the principle accents in the 11/4 part. That made it possible to put the melody together with the bassline and learn the song. Then he transposed the tune from its original horn key of F into E, a guitar key that allows him to exploit extra open string notes for orchestral effects. "I also listened to the version of 'Sippur' by the Masada String Trio. Putting my capo at the first fret and playing in E position helped me get the basic shape of the tune."

For the rhythm in the second part, Sparks uses the staggered bass line of "baião" (pronounced "bi-yow"), a Brazilian rhythm he first explored in "Eu So Quero Um Xodo," on the album *One String Follows Another*.

"Baião has a sort of skip in it," Sparks says. "I find a lot of times when I'm arranging an odd-metered song and trying to use a steady 4/4 thumb beat, like a Travis pattern, it just gets really complicated. Playing a skippy sort of thing like that little baião allows it all to fall together a lot easier. It really meshes nicely."

In 2010, *Acoustic Guitar* listed *Masada Guitars* as one of 20 essential acoustic albums of the past decade. The solo renditions underscore the depth and subtlety of Zorn's *Masada* work. Sparks' contributions are striking for their sophisticated ornamentation, dynamic rhythms, and bold turns of phrase. But tunes like "Sippur" continue to evolve as part of the guitarist's wide-ranging repertoire.

"Things you record change over time," Sparks says. "They improve and sound better.

You find little nuances and fingering ideas you wish you would have thought of before you made the recording. But it's not like I'm inventing anything. It's solving a problem. Like a Rubik's Cube.

"And a lot of practicing."



WHAT TIM SPARKS PLAYS

Tim Sparks plays an OM custom cutaway by Charles Hoffman and an acoustic/electric hybrid by Tim Reede. He strings the Hoffman with John Pearse Silk and Phosphor Bronze Strings and uses medium-gauge D'Addario XL with a wound third on the Tim Reede guitar. His K&K pickups are run through Red Eye and K&K preamps.

Sparks does his own stick-on nails, because they wear down fast on steel strings and need to be replaced once every week or ten days. "There seems to be only one brand readily available in most drugstores: Kiss Nails," he says. "There used to be a much better version called Fing'rs that can still be found in Europe."

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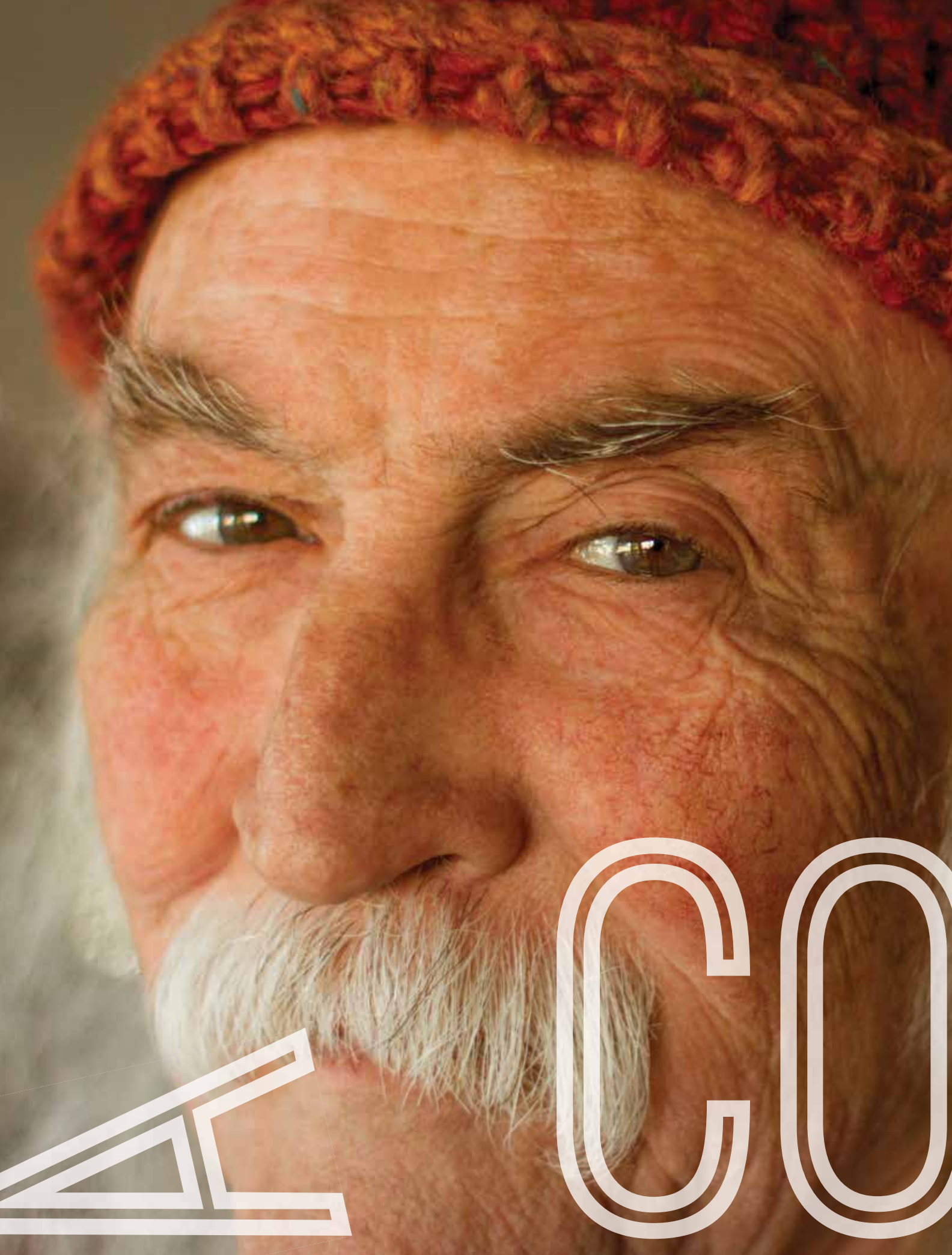
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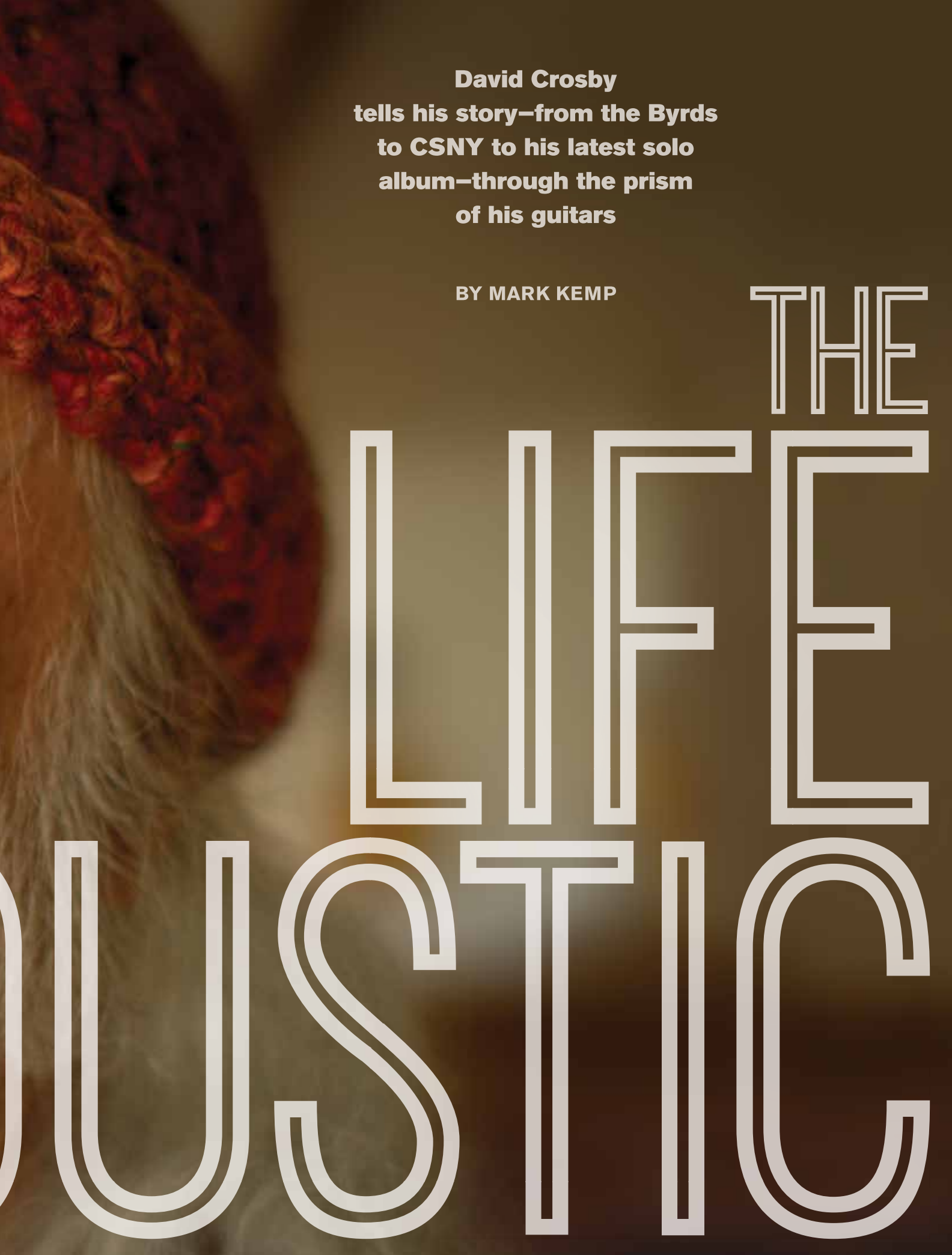
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**David Crosby
tells his story—from the Byrds
to CSNY to his latest solo
album—through the prism
of his guitars**

BY MARK KEMP

THE LIFE MUSIC



PHOTO ON PREVIOUS PAGE BY JOEY LUSTERMAN

“It’s hopeless,” David Crosby says. “If you ask me about dates and stuff, it’s not going to work.” Crosby’s annoyed. Specificity is not his thing. “I’m one hundred and ninety two years old,” he goes on. “I can’t remember *which* year *what* happened.”

Crosby, who’s actually 75, is sitting in an upright chair next to an earthy stone fireplace in the sunroom of his sprawling home in California’s Santa Ynez Valley, talking about some of his most prized acoustic guitars. There’s the Martin D-18 he purchased in Chicago for \$300 when he was barely out of his teens and playing the folk coffeehouses of the early 1960s. That’s the guitar Crosby converted into one of the most iconic 12-string mods in rock, around the time he joined the Byrds in 1964, and then took to the world stage five years later when Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young debuted at Woodstock. There’s also the ragged D-45s Crosby bought new in Berkeley in 1969 and *still* plays at his concerts. And then there’s the sterling blonde custom McAlister he’s been known to kiss onstage after particularly fiery performances.

But the guitar Crosby is thinking about right now is the one that got away. He becomes wistful remembering the 1939 Herringbone he traded for “substances” during his years in the

grips of a \$1,000-a-day cocaine and heroin addiction. “It’s not a pleasant memory,” Crosby says in a near whisper, his eyes misting slightly at the sides. “It’s just one of those things I gotta live with. I’ll regret it for the rest of my life. But there it is—I did it. That’s how it was.”

How it is today for Crosby—dressed casually in a knitted beanie, red T-shirt, jeans, and suspenders, his signature handlebar mustache now white as a Salvation Army Santa’s—is very different from how it was. In the three decades since 1983, when he sobered up in a Texas prison while serving nine months for drugs and weapons convictions, Crosby’s received a life-saving liver transplant and written far more songs than he ever did in his ’60s and ’70s heyday. He’s released five solo albums including his latest, the solo-acoustic *Lighthouse*, that finds the folk-rock icon going back to his folksy roots, and the forthcoming *Sky Trails*; four with CSN or CSNY; two with CPR (featuring Crosby, Jeff Pevar on guitar, and Crosby’s son James Raymond on keyboards); and several live recordings in each of those configurations. He’s currently on an extended solo-acoustic tour, mixing early CSN classics such as “Guinnevere” and “Déjà Vu” with more recent material.

To casual fans, Crosby is the main character

in the longest-running, non-televized celebrity reality show, regularly reuniting and breaking up with CSNY (and its various offshoots), most recently calling it quits yet again after a public feud with his one-time main advocate in the group, Graham Nash. “There’s a lot of personal stuff going on between me and Crosby,” Nash told *Acoustic Guitar* in the August 2016 issue. “CSN and CSNY is over. That’s the way it is.”

For now, anyway.

Meanwhile, Crosby’s kept the gossip columnists in business for reasons that have little to do with music. In 1998, his reunion with son Raymond, whom Crosby had given up for adoption 36 years earlier, was a hot topic topped only by his announcement two years later that he’d sired two children for then-celebrity-couple Melissa Etheridge and Julie Cypher. Crosby also hasn’t avoided legal troubles altogether. In 2004 he was arrested yet again on guns and drug charges, but the drug charge (for a small amount of marijuana) was dismissed and Crosby only had to pay a \$5,000 fine for the weapons offense.

Through it all, Crosby’s passion for acoustic guitars has only deepened. He’s a collector whose repeated use of words like “stunner” and “beauty” to describe his guitars, their sound, and their



Before forming the Byrds, Crosby converted a '50s-era Martin D-18 into a 12-fret, 12-string. It remains one of his favorite guitars.

HENRY DILTZ

playability is a testament to his genuine love affair with the instruments. "I'm appropriate for you guys," Crosby says as he shows off the 15 guitars he's painstakingly cherry-picked and set up in his bedroom for AG to showcase. He reaches for each instrument, one at a time, strums it, and reels off the specs like a kid describing the treasures of a particularly bountiful Christmas morning. "I'm an acoustic guitar fanatic!"

AN ACOUSTIC GUITAR FANATIC

Crosby, the younger son of Hollywood cinematographer Floyd Crosby (*Tabu*, *High Noon*, *The Pit and the Pendulum*) was born August 14, 1941, and was about 14 when his brother Ethan gave him his first guitar, a Silvertone acoustic. "He got a new one, so he gave me his old one," Crosby remembers. "I learned two chords and I played them endlessly." He and Ethan, who also played stand-up bass in jazz and Latin combos, began performing together as a folk duo. "As soon as I started playing live, that was it—I was done," Crosby says.

By the time Crosby hit his 20s, he wanted a great guitar—he'd had a Vega 12-string, but Martins were calling his name. "I was in Chicago working [the folk clubs] Mother Blues and Old Town North, and I took the money I

made and I found a D-18 in a shop way out in the suburbs," he remembers. "I rode out there on the bus, bought it, and brought it back. It was a really good, '50s, lightweight D-18." He points to his bed, where he's neatly lined up seven of the 15 guitars: "It's what became that 12-string over there."

The conversion of his D-18 into a 12-string happened when Crosby got back to California and visited Lundberg's Fretted Instruments, a shop in Berkeley that sold and repaired vintage acoustics. "I went to [Jon] Lundberg and said, 'Listen, I want this to be a 12-string. Can you make this into a 12-string?' He said, 'Yeah,'" Crosby remembers. "They made it into a 12-fret 12-string, which turns out to be part of its success story."

According to Crosby, the repairman at Lundberg's had to push the bridge to the center of the top to make it a 12-fret. "So the bridge is in a different place than it is on a 14-fret," Crosby explains. "That's one of the reasons this thing sounds as good as it does. The other reason is that it has a spectacular top on it." He walks over to the bed, picks up the instrument, and begins tuning it. "An amazing guitar," he exclaims as he sounds the two low E strings. They ring out clearly and with surprisingly

'[My modified Martin D-18] is still the best 12-string I ever encountered anywhere, and I have played some stunner 12-strings.'

thick volume. "And that's just two out of 12. It's loud!" Crosby says with a cocky wink. "Near as I can tell, it's still the best 12-string I ever encountered anywhere, and I have played some *stunner* 12-strings." He points to the guitar's battle scars. "It's kind of beat up now. It's been with me a long, long time."

In 2009, Martin issued a commercial version, the D-12 David Crosby, built from the specs of his converted D-18. The D-12 has a D-14 body style, mahogany back and sides, a spruce top, and Crosby's signature between the 16th and 17th frets. "It's a cool guitar, too," he says, again pointing to the collection. "I have one of the prototypes right there."

THE PREFLYTE ERA

Crosby's 12-string mod was the only guitar he owned in 1964, when he ambled into one of his Los Angeles mainstays, the fabled

Troubadour club on Santa Monica Boulevard, and sang some harmonies with fellow folkies Jim McGuinn, who later changed his name to Roger, and Gene Clark. Crosby had seen McGuinn when the guitarist accompanied '50s-era folk group the Limelighters. But Clark, fresh from the New Christy Minstrels, was a new kid on the block.

"Roger and Gene were up there singing these songs that Gene had been writing after he saw the Beatles," Crosby remembers. "He was fascinated with the Beatles. He wanted to be the Beatles—as we all did—but he didn't know the rules about music. He was completely uneducated, like me, so he just did what felt good."

McGuinn, on the other hand, was an accomplished guitarist, having played not only with the Limelighters, but also the Chad Mitchell Trio, Judy Collins, and even Bobby Darin. "So he and Gene are sitting there playing and I just sit down with them and start singing harmony," Crosby says. "They both go. . ." Crosby makes a facial expression of awe and silently mouths the word, "Wow."

The experience reminded Crosby of his first job as a busboy at a coffeehouse in his hometown of Santa Barbara, where he worked for

free just for the opportunity to sing harmonies with the paid folksinger. "The only reason I got through high school was the choir," he says. "Every once in a while we'd get all in tune, and the whole rest of the room would lift up and get magical for a minute. I love that shit! It feels real good."

As soon as Crosby says this, a wind chime outside on the patio rings behind him like punctuation.

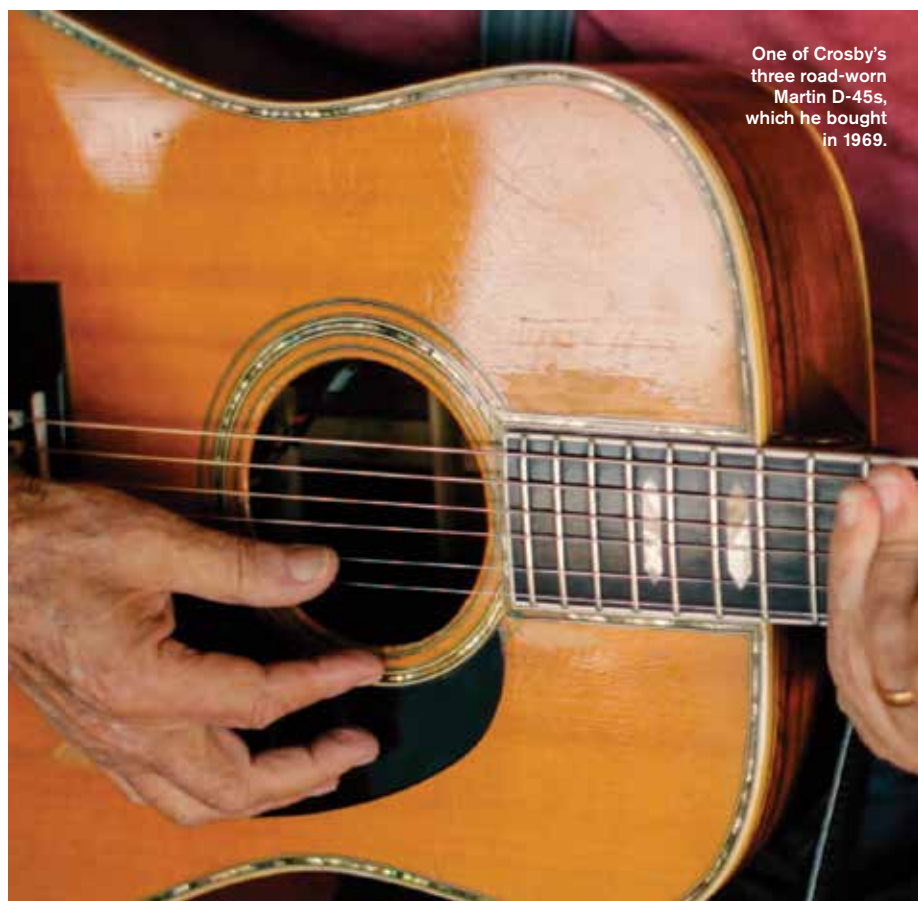
Shortly after their Troubadour meeting, Crosby, McGuinn, and Clark, along with drummer Michael Clarke, formed the Byrds, and began mixing their acoustic folk sensibilities with the electric pop appeal of the Beatles. McGuinn's signature Rickenbacker 12-string jangle gave the Byrds an instantly recognizable sound, and the group immediately shot to the top of the pop charts in 1965 with sparkling covers of Bob Dylan's "Mr. Tambourine Man" and Pete Seeger's "Turn, Turn, Turn."

"I'd started out in the Byrds with my 12-string, because it was the only guitar I had at the time," Crosby says. "But that didn't really cut it for being in the Byrds. I needed—I thought—what George [Harrison] was playing: a Gretsch. So I got a Tennessean, and pretty

soon after, a Country Gentleman. That was my main electric guitar for a long time. It was a very good electric guitar. I had a lot of fun with it. I put an STP sticker on it."

Other Top 40 hits followed for the Byrds, including "Eight Miles High," "Mr. Space-man," and "So You Want to Be a Rock 'n' Roll Star," but after three years Crosby was getting restless. He'd written a musically adventurous song, "Triad," with racy lyrics about a three-way orgy, for the group's 1968 album *The Notorious Byrd Brothers*. The Byrds nixed it, but Jefferson Airplane recorded an acoustic version for their *Crown of Creation* record of the same year.

"We were changing very drastically and very fast," Crosby says of the Byrds. "I was learning how to write and I wanted to write—I wanted more, I wanted a bigger piece of the pie. So I said I wanted to write some of the songs we were recording and, um . . . I don't think I was a very nice guy at that point. I was pretty. . ."—he pauses for a good 15 seconds, gazing blankly out the back window at the rolling hills of his property—"volatile. There's a good word. In any case, we had disagreements and they asked me to leave the group, so I did."



One of Crosby's three road-worn Martin D-45s, which he bought in 1969.

LAUREL CANYON CALLING

By the time Crosby left the Byrds, he'd been hanging out among a growing group of musicians who'd moved to the Laurel Canyon area of Los Angeles, including Joni Mitchell, a few of Crosby's fellow Byrds, and members of Buffalo Springfield, including guitarists Neil Young and Stephen Stills. "I was working at writing songs but not really knowing what direction to go in, and I was hanging out with Stephen Stills because Stephen's group had fallen apart," Crosby remembers. "I had already sung with them at Monterey Pop [Festival], because Neil had split on them."

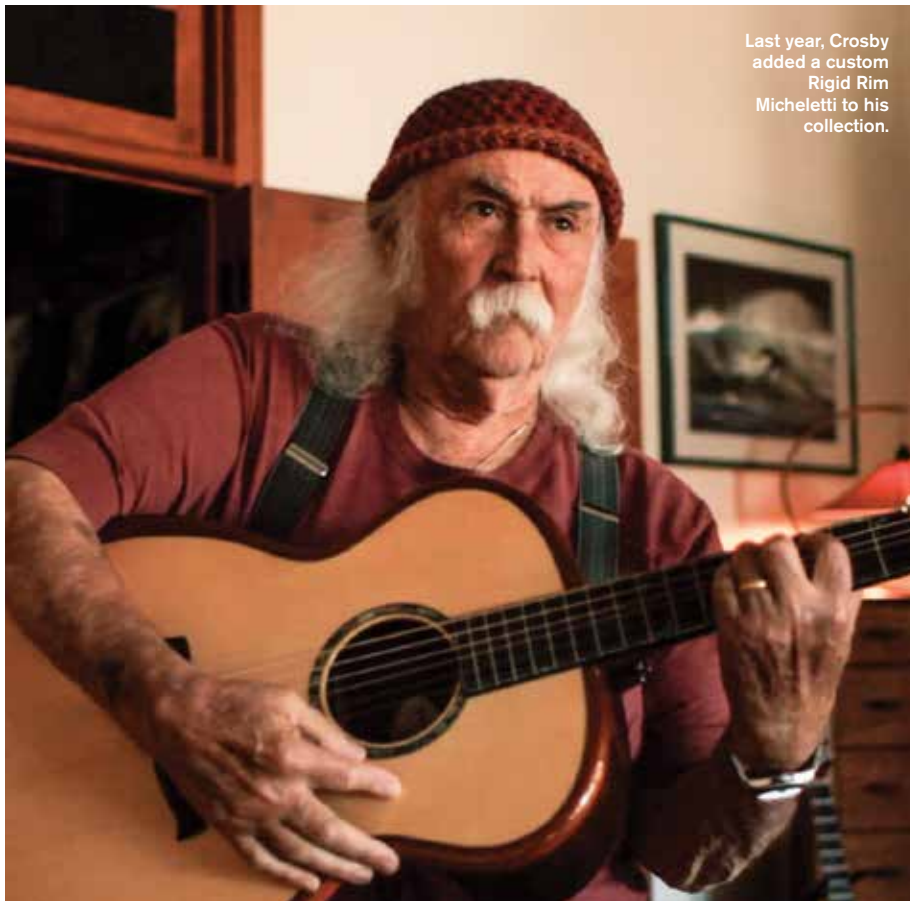
Crosby rolls his eyes.

"That's Neil."

It wasn't just Stills' soulful harmony vocals, but also his dazzling acoustic-guitar work that impressed Crosby. "He got stuff out of an acoustic that people just didn't get out of them—a lot of attitude, a lot of punch," Crosby says. "So we would hang out together—he and I and [Jimi] Hendrix, he and I and Cass [Elliot], he and I and eventually Nash."

Crosby and Stills found their sweet spot with Nash, and CSN was born. "It was so easy," Crosby says. "We didn't even think twice about it. When we heard ourselves sing together, the three of us, we knew that we wanted to do this."

JOEY LUSTERMAN



Last year, Crosby added a custom Rigid Rim Micheletti to his collection.

JOEY LUSTERMAN

'I'm an acoustic guitar fanatic!'

Initially, all three members were playing only acoustic guitars, and Crosby wanted them all to be the same. "Martins. All of us," he says. "I had a couple of D-28s that I don't think I have anymore, but then in 1969, Martin started making D-45s again. They hadn't done that since before the war, and soon as I saw one, I wanted it. So I went again to Lundberg's, and they had a number of them. I picked the three best and bought them. Right then. Still got 'em."

It wasn't long after CSN released its self-titled debut album in 1969, followed the next year by *Déjà Vu*, with Young in the mix, that things began falling apart. And that's been the nature of the relationship for almost a half-century since. Perhaps surprisingly, Crosby says the four were never good co-songwriters, just great singers. Unlike his current songwriting partnership with son James—as well as past partnerships such as the one he had with the Airplane's Paul Kantner, with whom Crosby and Stills wrote "Wooden Ships"—Crosby says there was never much chem-

istry among the members of CSN or CSNY.

And yet, even as adamant as Nash was in the 2016 AG feature, he's since backpedaled on his pronouncement that CSN is over for good. "You never know," Nash later told Ultimateclassicrock.com. "If Crosby came and played me four songs that knocked me on my ass, what the f— am I supposed to do as a musician, no matter how pissed we are at each other?"

And so continues the saga of rock's longest-running soap opera. **AG**



Crosby's McAllister

JOEY LUSTERMAN

OF MARTINS & ODD TUNINGS

It's fair to say David Crosby has long been a Martin guy, although his tastes have expanded. "I'm a Martin guy until I ran into [the independent luthier] Roy McAllister," he says. "Now I'm a Martin-McAllister guy. But, yeah, I love Martins. America should be very proud of Martin. It's a stunning guitar company and they still make the best guitars in the world that are production-made. There are a small handful of one-of-a-kind guitar-makers—luthiers who build slowly, one guitar at a time—who are good, and there are a couple who are spectacular. But Martin's it. Martin is the world standard."

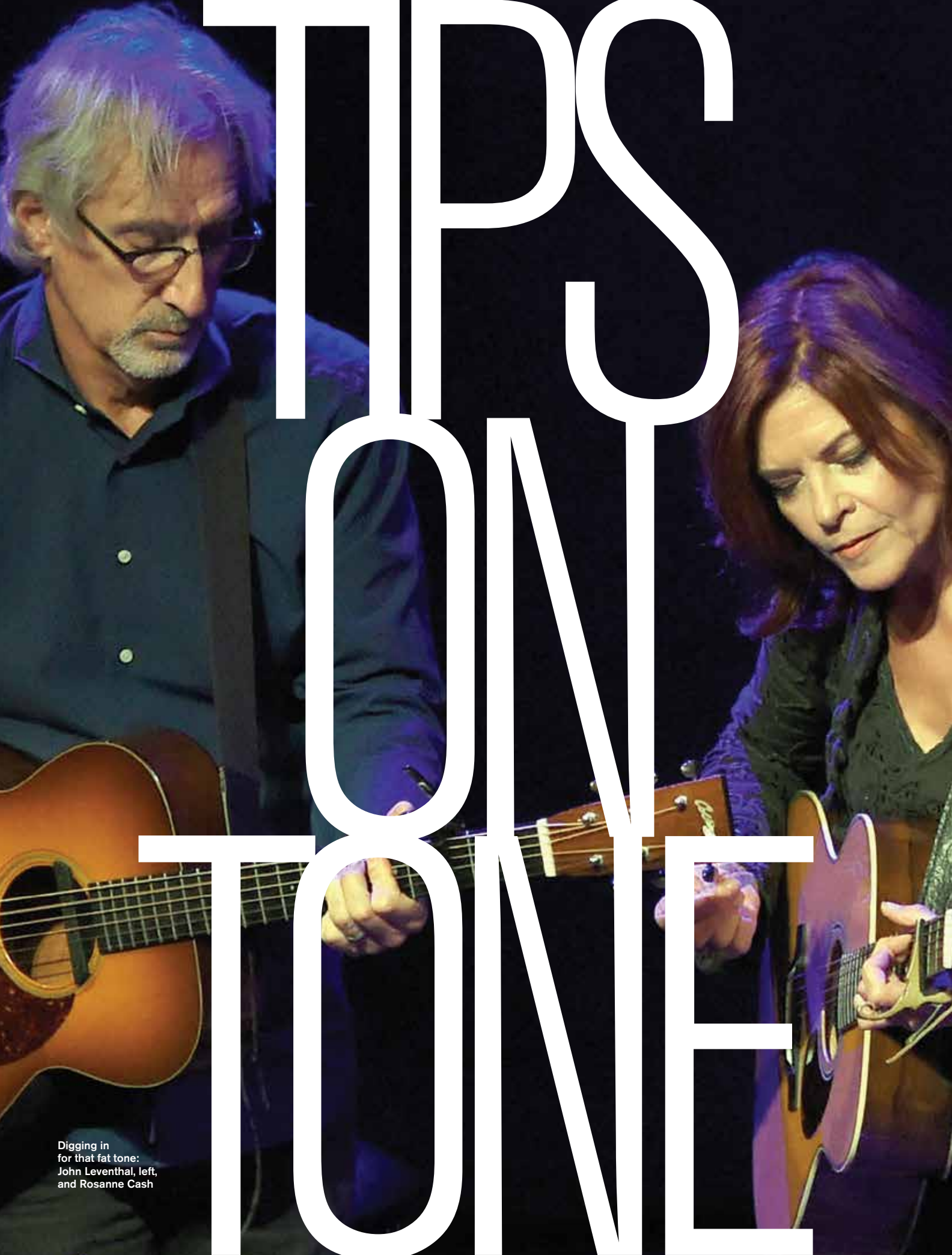
Of the guitars strewn across Crosby's bed and on stands surrounding it, most are Martins. But he has owned guitars by other major companies. "I've got a rosewood J-200 from the Gibson custom shop that's an excellent guitar—but Gibson's regular guitars have gone downhill," Crosby says. "They're not even close. They never were as good as Martins, but they've now gotten to the point that you can't even consider them in the same league."

In terms of his Martins, Crosby's favorites are the three D-45s he bought in 1969. "I've been using them the whole time," he says. "They were worn down with bare patches of wood on the tops, because they've been played for so long. Want to see one?"

He walks over to one of the guitar stands, returns with one of the D-45s, and runs a hand over the top, pointing to the worn spots: "Here, here, here, and here—you can see just how much playing has gone on." He turns it over. "And the finish has worn off on the back of the neck here."

He strums the intro to "Guinnevere," one of the songs written in his peculiar EBDGAD tuning, which some players call the "Crosby Tuning."

He explains how he discovered it: "What happened is, when I started working in different tunings. A producer, showed me the EBDGAD tuning and I just went crazy. That's what I wrote 'Guinnevere' in, that's what I wrote 'Déjà Vu' in, and that's when I started needing to have a number of guitars, because I would keep them in different tunings so I could switch from one to the other without having to retune a guitar."



TIPS FOR THAT FAT TONE

Digging in
for that fat tone:
John Leventhal, left,
and Rosanne Cash

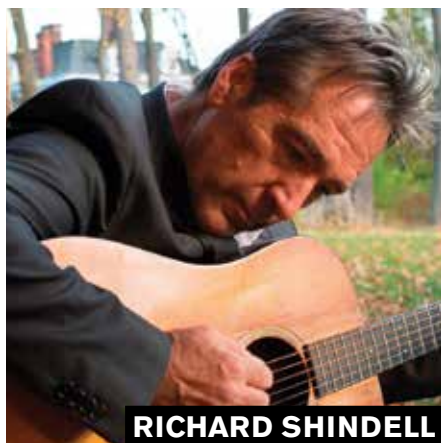


15 players share their strategies in the relentless pursuit of an ideal sound | BY GREG CAHILL

“What is good tone? That’s a very good question, but difficult to answer succinctly,” says songwriter and record producer John Leventhal, known for his work with Rosanne Cash, William Bell, and other top artists. “It’s heartfelt and musical. It’s generally a fat tone, I don’t like thin tone. When it comes to acoustic guitar, I’m trying to pull a lot of tone out of the guitar.”

Pulling tone out of the guitar . . . it’s a sort of acoustic alchemy. Yet, the best players prove the old adage is true—tone is in your hands. For example, one of the most beautiful, warm, rounded acoustic guitar tones I’ve ever encountered came from Brazilian flamenco guitarist Badi Assad. She was visiting the *AG* studio to shoot an *Acoustic Guitar Sessions* episode. When I walked in on her warming up, I commented on her striking sound and asked about her axe, assuming she was playing a hotshot hand-built guitar. She wasn’t—she’d forgotten her guitar and borrowed a cheap (under \$150) axe from then-senior editor David Knowles.

Oftentimes, acoustic guitarists, frustrated with their tone, opt to buy a new guitar in an effort to find the sound they hear in their minds, and that’s OK—sometimes it helps, and you can never own enough guitars. After all, who wants to play bluegrass on an



RICHARD SHINDELL

all-mahogany single-0, or blues on a koa dread? Certainly, electronics can help shape your tone—plenty of guitarists swear by their ToneWoodAmp, L.R. Baggs Para Acoustic DI, or Fishman Platinum Pro EQ. But what does it mean when people say tone is in the hands? Is it the shape of your nails? Or the thickness of your pick (Richard Shindell uses a heavy 1.5mm Dunlop PrimeTone)? Or whether you use the pointed or the rounded corner of a standard medium pick? Is it the way you attack the strings? Or is it the gauge or tension of those strings? Does an ivory nut, saddle, or bridge-pin set improve tone?

One thing is clear: Good tone isn’t a one-size-fits-all deal—it is viewed by some as subjective, but competitions often judge, at least in part, on tone. Clearly, acoustic guitarists can learn about tone from each other—experimentation is encouraged. (And failure is accepted.)

So, *Acoustic Guitar* asked 15 prominent acoustic guitarists from a variety of disciplines, to share their thoughts in their own words on this elusive thing called tone. We also enlisted blues hound and *AG* resident repair specialist Mamie Minch of Brooklyn Lutherie to discuss the ways a professional setup can help achieve the tone of your dreams. And, after scouring internet guitar forums, we’ve added a list of tone-related items that are on the minds of the online acoustic-guitar community.

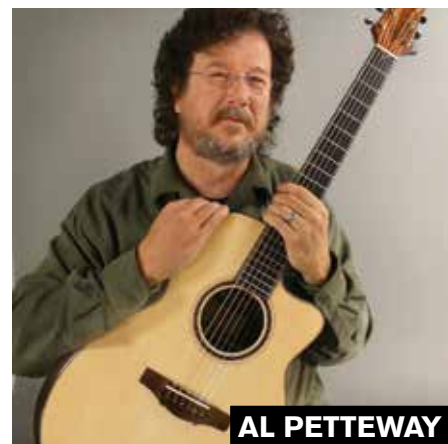
Share your own thoughts about tone in the comments section below the online version of this story at AcousticGuitar.com.

1 JOHN LEVENTHAL, SONGWRITER, RECORD PRODUCER

Live performance and the studio are two different worlds for me; they’re two different mindsets. In the studio, I don’t have too much guitar ego—it’s all about making the song and the recording happen. Live, I have a little

bit more guitar ego. So, for the past 15 years, onstage, I’ve been using this Collings OM1. I have a Schertler undersaddle pickup and a Fishman soundhole pickup: The Schertler goes into the house direct and the Fishman goes into a Fender amp and I blend the two. It seems to work out.

I keep a flat pick in my hands, but I use my fingers a lot. Over the years, I have developed a



AL PETTEWAY

lot of techniques to pull a lot of tone out of the guitar. **I use a very heavy pick and I find that gives me a slightly darker, fatter sound.** In fact, the heavier the pick, the more tone I get. Also, relative to most people, I play pretty deliberately—when I play something, I really mean it. I don’t hedge my bets. But having said that, I love ballads and I use my fingers as well.

2 AL PETTEWAY, FINGERSTYLIST

I’ve always felt that each player has his or her own unique tone. I feel that, as a finger-style player, the most important thing is to have really smooth nails, whether they’re natural or artificial—I always make sure every surface is smooth and rounded off. Also, I’ve found that

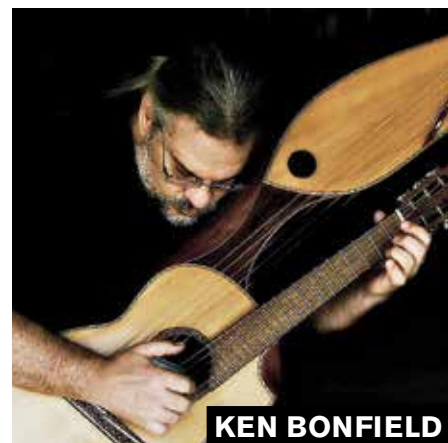


LAURIE LEWIS

HALI MCGRATH

‘When a pick gets a worn edge, a little fine sandpaper helps it along, followed by a buffing on the blue jeans—a polished pick slides more easily across the strings.’

LAURIE LEWIS



KEN BONFIELD



SEAN MCGOWAN

attacking the string from a slight angle helps the tone and allows the nail to slide off the string while plucking in a way that creates a more meaty tone. Probably the most important thing, though, is to **use strings that are a high enough gauge to make the notes sound full and not thin**—it's important to have enough resistance to your attack that you can control the volume without losing tone. Higher action helps me achieve a better tone as well. Not real high, but high enough that I can dig in without worrying about buzzing.

3 KEN BONFIELD, FINGERSTYLIST, COMPOSER

I've long believed that a guitarist's most important piece of gear as it relates to tone are the hands and fingers. I also believe a lot of my tone is in my acrylic nails, and to a certain extent how I maintain them. And, of course, how I attack the guitar is as important as what I attack it with. **Attack really matters tonally when I'm plugged in, especially with under-the-saddle pickups.**

4 LAURIE LEWIS, SONGWRITER, BLUEGRASS GUITARIST

I make sure that whatever pick I use, the edges are smooth. Picks with a slight molded edge around them give a scrape-y tone to the strings. And picks with a lot of wear from the strings also sound scratchy. **When a pick gets a worn edge, a little fine sandpaper helps it along, followed by a buffing on the blue jeans**—a polished pick slides more easily across the strings. I like a fairly heavy pick, and use the weight of my hand to carry the pick across the strings. I also find that the nail of my first finger has a lot to do with the tone, as it hits the strings along with the pick.

In addition, if I allow the guitar's back to be free of my body, with the top and bottom of the lower bouts just resting against my rib and thigh, the instrument is more

lively-sounding (a good argument for keeping weight off the belly). I try not to dampen the tone with my body.

5 SEAN MCGOWAN, EDUCATOR, FINGERSTYLE JAZZ GUITARIST

Playing your guitar without excessive tension is paramount to achieving good tone and avoiding a repetitive strain injury. The best players' technique looks and sounds intense, yet is tension free. Shaking out and stretching your hand and fingers before and after playing will help rid your hand of excessive tension or muscle cramping. It's important to find the balance in your hands between "normal" engagement of your hand muscles and excessive tension that could result in injury. **If your hands are unusually sore or fatigued after playing, you're probably holding too much tension in your hands.** If there's tension in your arms, shoulders, or neck, stretch before you play and consciously try to relax while playing. And don't forget to breathe!

Lastly, make a mental note when you get that elusive tone you're going for. You may not even need to know exactly how you got that sound, but if you mentally identify it when it happens, you'll end up there more often.



DARRELL SCOTT

6 DARRELL SCOTT, RECORDING ARTIST, NASHVILLE STUDIO PLAYER

I took a year and a half off from the road . . . and I didn't play a lot in that time, on purpose. I know there's a mentality that says, practice, practice, practice. But I found that if you get away, it's good. Yes, I lost my calluses and at the end of the first gig, after I returned to the stage, my fingertips were all tattered and flaked, but I noticed that I was playing quieter. I found that I was playing underneath the sound when I returned—before, I had been slamming down on the instrument and hitting harder than I needed to. So the general premise is to **come**

up underneath the sound as opposed to coming down on it and demanding, "Come out of that box, out of those strings." I was saying, "Let me command, through my power, let me slam you into being with my right hand." That's not a good way to go. The better way, in terms of volume, dynamics, sensibility, presence, is to come up underneath the sound, and tone will show up much more readily than if you were slamming it into being. People think that they have to say with their guitar, "I've got to get my point across, I've got to get this guitar playing across, you've got to hear what I have to say!" Uh, no you don't. Come up underneath the sound and see what reveals itself in a sweeter kind of way.



JAMIE STILLWAY

7 JAMIE STILLWAY, FINGERSTYLE SOLOIST, EDUCATOR

Right-hand considerations: For fingerpicking guitarists, before advancing into the world of fingerpicks, try growing short nails on your right hand and explore the basic classical techniques of a rest stroke versus a free stroke. For those comfortable with fingerpicks, make sure to try a variety of fingerpicks, as each material has its own unique tone. For flatpicking, I always prefer a thicker pick, my favorite is a [1.4mm] Wegen bluegrass pick. Left-hand considerations: Practice scales very slowly, and **concentrate on letting each note ring as long as possible before fretting the next note.** Of course, always be mindful of where you are placing your fingers in relation to the fret; being too far away from the fret will often lead to a buzzy tone, and you might overcompensate by pressing too hard.

8 JASON VIEUX, GRAMMY-WINNING CLASSICAL GUITARIST

Tone is really in the ears. I know that may sound funny, but if you don't know the tone or sound you want aesthetically, what it should sound like, then it's a lot harder for the hands



TYLER BOYE

JASON VIEUX

‘It’s not all that helpful for one to be super goal-oriented in this kind of exercise—it’s a lovely journey!’

JASON VIEUX

and fingers to find it. The end part of the process is in the hands, certainly, but that connection between your hands and your heart is really your ears. A lot of experimentation mixed with, hopefully, a good teacher that plays well can be a path to finding your tone or sound. When I was practicing as a kid growing up in Buffalo, I was not afraid to improvise and compose and jump (briefly!) off my studies, simply because I loved the sound of the guitar for its intrinsic aesthetic qualities. I prepared my lesson assignments with absolute seriousness, but my excursions into pure guitar sound were brief—little commentaries on the piece I was playing for my own amusement, or some improv off of the material I was practicing, again, only for the joy of finding the sound I wanted to find at that particular time.

This exercise is particularly good for classical guitarists, where the tone and sound is “finished” through their fingertips. We have to find a very specific sound for a specific character in a musical piece, section, or passage to honor the composer and their stated desires. The only conduit is our ears and fingers, whereas an electric guitarist would achieve their same goal in most cases through a more complex and varied chain of technology. Which I love, by the way. When listening to electric guitarists, I love how Stephen Carpenter, Eddie Van Halen, Alex Chilton, Adrian Belew, and Pat Metheny, among others, get to their place, however they do that. As I’m writing this, I realize that I probably listened to more electric guitarists than acoustic this year—hmmm.

5 WAYS A SETUP CAN IMPROVE YOUR TONE

A professional setup is one of the smartest things you can do for your guitar. The right setup (avg. cost \$75-\$100) will not only enhance your guitar’s performance, it will further customize its sound and feel to support your playing style. So how do you know when you need a setup?

Most newly bought guitars—especially those aimed at beginners—will need to be set up when brought home for the first time. After that, once or twice a year is enough. Professional players may do it more often, due to the shifts in humidity and temperatures that accompany seasonal changes or because touring life can be hard on a guitar. If you notice something change in the way a guitar plays or in its tonal response, chances are your guitar is ready for its regular 10,000 mile check up—a professional setup.

HERE ARE SOME KEY POINTS:

1 Saddle If your new guitar came with a plastic saddle, it can only get better from there. Fitting a bone saddle to your guitar will be the single most striking thing you can do to improve the tone (avg. cost: \$100). Bone is denser and harder than plastic, and will give you more volume, sustain, and clarity across the frequencies. While the cost of a new saddle is not included in a standard setup, fine-tuning its height is. The height of a saddle figures into more than just the action—the break angle of the strings over that saddle can affect the drive of a top. And making sure the saddle fits neatly into its slot—it should be snug in the bridge without being glued in—will help that vibrational transfer, too.

2 Bridge Here, your tech will look for more ways to eliminate vibrational loss. Is the bridge glue joint still good, or can you slip a piece of paper under it? Are the bridge-pin holes tapered and do the bridge pins fit well, nicely anchoring the ball end of the string against your bridge plate?

3 Nut If your nut is plastic, upgrading to bone is a great idea (avg. cost: \$100). A well-fit bone nut will transfer



more vibration to the right places and improve tonal quality when the strings are played unfretted—it’ll be more subtle than at the saddle, but it makes a difference. In a setup, the nut slots will be dialed in: Are they the right depth? Are they pitched correctly, and can the string ride through the slot without binding?

4 Neck How’s your neck looking? You may know it’s time for a setup from a change in how your guitar plays thanks to your neck bowing forward—but a neck can also bow back. Most subtle neck-relief issues can be fixed with a truss rod tweak. A neck that is healthy—straight but with just the right amount of relief—will do a better job of transferring vibration down its length.

5 Strings You need the right gauge of string—and the right tension—for your guitar. If you go too light, they’ll feel jangly and the guitar will sound thin, too heavy and they’ll be no fun to play and may produce more tension than your guitar can handle over time. Your tech will help you choose your strings based on the kind of guitar you have, its scale length, and the style in which you want to play.

Hot Bonus Tip How do you know if your saddle is bone? Check the color: plastic is usually a brighter white than bone, and over time, your strings will wear grooves in a plastic saddle. This softness is why it’s bad for tone. If you are having a hard time figuring it out, try this: Take off the strings and pull out the saddle. Smile! Now tap the saddle against your teeth—does it make a bright, hard click, like your teeth and the saddle are the same material? Or a darker, quieter thunk? If it’s the former, it’s bone, if it’s the latter, it’s plastic.

—Mamie Minch

The main thing is, try a lot of different things. Try different nail lengths, nail shapes, angles of attack to the string. It's not all that helpful for one to be super goal-oriented in this kind of exercise—it's a lovely journey. John Holmquist, my professor at Cleveland Institute of Music, had this great teaching exercise where, once I found a more acceptable sound/tone to his liking, he would say, "OK, now play me what you sounded like before." And that command would make you think about *how* you executed your previous "different" tone/sound. It's such a fantastic way to teach, because it takes you out of yourself and you start to hear sound as it really is. And it made you think how you *physically* produced both sounds.

For classical guitarists, try to study with as many of your favorite tone or sound guitarists as you can. We're pretty approachable for the most part, and willing to share what we do and how we do it.

9 JEFFREY TITUS, HARP GUITARIST

Apart from the ears, tone is the vibration produced by an acoustic guitar most directly captured to players' minds through



TERRI HENDRIX

MARY KEATING BRUTON

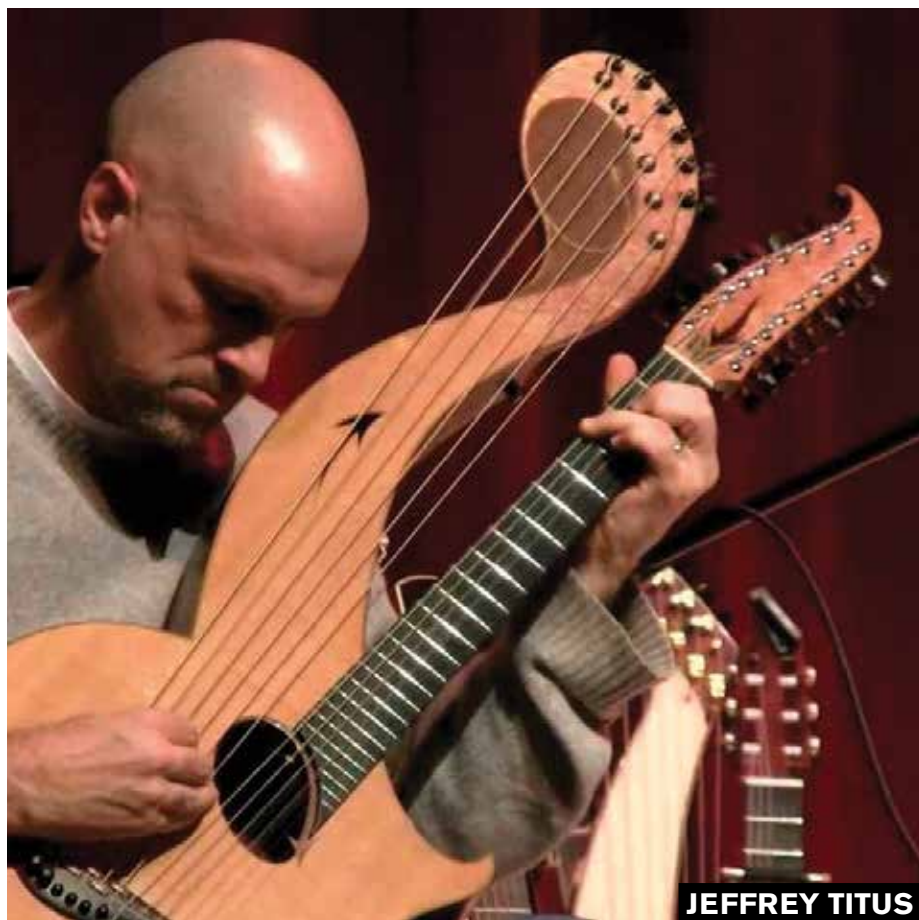
our hands. As we manipulate the strings, our minds anticipate the tones before they manifest as sound waves. This makes us time travelers, seeing the future, experiencing past, present, and future sound all at once. By this example, we should anticipate increased quality of tone through the practice of "visualizing" sound—taking the focus required to prepare and perform acoustic-guitar music clearly and with confidence. We should extend that focus and concentration well

before and far after we actually play our instruments. **Relaxation is certainly key.** The guitar has an incredible dynamic range that may be exploited most effectively by knowing how quietly you can play your instrument, with the least amount of stress on your posture, and still have the top move enough air to reach the listener.

10 TERRI HENDRIX, SINGER-SONGWRITER

I've played all types of guitars in just about every setting imaginable. Heat has not been kind to my instruments. I gave up the wrestling match and have been playing a composite these days. Live performance aside, no matter where I play or what guitar I play, the tone is going to come from my hands. Bells and whistles are nice. But in the end, it's about the player. My favorite players have mastered their instrument. A great example is Sonny Landreth. He has tone, but is in total control of his instrument.

A few tips I picked up from other players: **Playing too hard has diminishing results.** I made myself learn to play with a heavier pick. I gave up fake nails and learned to play with metal fingerpicks, even though it's taken a long time to get the tone warm. I find these picks are much more reliable than fake nails and have a more consistent tone when I fingerpick. Also, I concentrate on relaxing my right hand, so I get a better tone. When I tense up, I lose tone.



JEFFREY TITUS



JOHN STORIE

11 JOHN STORIE, JAZZ GUITARIST, EDUCATOR

For the purpose of solo acoustic-guitar playing, it's always fun to experiment with thumb picks and flat picks of various strength. When playing with other musicians or in a situation in which the guitar needs to "cut" through the mix, I've found it's always helpful



PETE MADSEN

‘A guitar is an instrument, tone is what you do with it. A talented guitarist can find something in even a cheap guitar, as long as it plays decently!’

PETE MADSEN

to use a thicker pick. To get a greater dynamic range out of a steel-string guitar, **using a heavier pick can help make the strumming much more “punchy,” delivering a bold articulation.** Thinner picks can get a very transparent sound, which can be helpful when trying to get a strumming part to sit inside the mix or sound more distant. Experimenting with microphones can also bring out the pick sound on a guitar through a PA system, and sometimes can help create a very percussive sound when strumming, not unlike a shaker or hand percussion instrument.

**12 PETE MADSEN,
BLUES ARTIST, EDUCATOR**

A guitar is an instrument, tone is what you do with it. A talented guitarist can find something in even a cheap guitar, as long as it plays decently. I know that many people seek a particular sound from a particular instrument, but if you keep an open mind you can actually find that funky, even thin-sounding instruments have their place. I used to seek out a big boomy bass in the acoustic guitars I played. But the more I got into acoustic pre-war blues, the more I realized that a big bass didn’t really serve me well. **The bass tones in fingerpicked blues sound better when they are sharp and percussive, whereas a guitar with a boomy bass can sound a bit muddy.** So I drifted from Brazilian rosewood to mahogany, from X-braced

guitars to ladder-braced guitars. Now there are times when I favor my rosewood guitars—like when I tune down or play slower-tempo songs, where the lush tones can resonate. But when I want to play a faster-tempo ragtime, I like a guitar with a faster decay and a crisp percussive sound.

I also think there is a psychology to iconic guitars, in which there is a certain expectation as to how it’s supposed to be played—a certain style, certain licks. Whereas a no-name guitar has no expectations attached to it, so you can play whatever.

**13 PAT KIRTLEY, FINGERSTYLIST AND
THUMB-PICKING HALL OF FAMER**

Tone comes from listening to yourself and having the idea that you’re always going to improve it. What I think about is making it have more impact, more drive. **You can have drive even in a song that is slow—don’t hold back because it’s slow.** You add a little bit of intensity with the force that you use with the right hand, but it’s really controlled. I struggled for years with getting the best tone out of my fingers. What I ended up with was the thumbpick. The first thing I noticed was

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7 MORE QUICK TONE TIPS

1 LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

Picking close to the bridge can produce a tight, percussive tone, while picking toward the neck will present a darker, bassy tone. Great players tend to strum in different locations along the strings' length, sometimes moving from one location to another, from bar to bar, or verse to chorus, to produce a complex, textured tone. Experiment. Look for the sweet spot.

2 TONE IN THE PALM OF YOUR HAND

Palm muting, or lightly making contact with the strings with the heel of your picking hand, most notably when strumming, can add a lot of thunk to your tone. Greg Brown uses this percussive technique a lot (check out his laconic song "Now That I'm My Grandpa"), and singer and songwriter Ani DiFranco told AG that she initially used palm muting for emphasis in loud bars and it became a signature.

3 THUMBS UP

A lot of attention is paid to picking or strumming with a plectrum, or fingerpicking with the nails or pads of your fingertips, but strumming with the fleshy pad of your pick-hand thumb can produce a soft, warm tone. This might seem obvious, but it's amazing how few guitarists strum with the thumb. Add it to your tone toolkit.

4 LEAN TO THE LEFT ... OR THE RIGHT

Fret-hand technique is a major factor in producing warm, rich tones filled with emotion: Practice your vibrato, bends, and



slurs. Someone once asked Eric Clapton if he practices, assuming that the guitar god had transcended this discipline followed by mere mortals. Clapton assured the interviewer that he practices every day. What does he practice? Bending the strings, so he can get it just right (quarter step, half step, full step). Make it sing.

5 DOWN BUT NOT OUT—TRY A DROP TUNING

Drop-D tuning (DADGBE) is a favorite among folk and blues players. But try using double drop-D tuning (DADGBD), sometimes known as the Neil Young modal tuning (though Pieta Brown and others use it often). You can hear the results on Young's "After the Gold Rush." It's friendly to the standard D-chord shape, but lends a moody minor tone to your playing. Or drop your sixth and fifth strings one step (DGDGBE), which offers a slack-key effect. Once again, it's friendly to the D-chord shape (as well as D minor and A minor shapes) while broadening your tonal palette. One other suggestion: tune all your strings down a half step (D#G#C#F#A#D) to darken your tone—some guitars love it.

6 CHECK YOUR TECHNIQUE

Using different techniques to visualize your sound can have an impact on your tone. For example, guitarist Earl Klugh says he tries to "visualize the guitar more like the piano—particularly

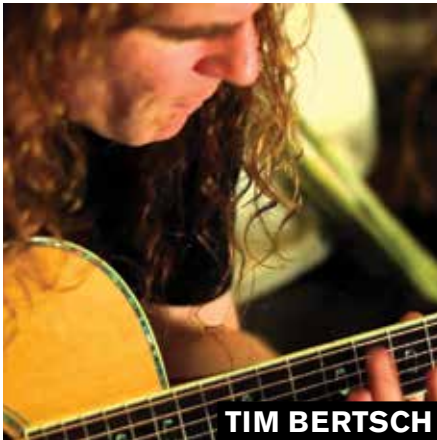
the way [jazz pianist] Bill Evans would play. I've listened to his records for countless hours. He had so much expression, and there was economy in a lot of the things he did, in his voicings—all that close harmony . . . Since I'm not a plectrum player at all, and I don't have terribly fast right-hand technique, I tried to find something else that would be musically interesting . . . A guitarist can't really do everything a piano player does, but you can get that feeling going."

7 THE THING ABOUT STRINGS

It's not unusual to fall back on a favorite brand of reliable strings. But experimenting with different types of strings, and even mixing string sets, can be a treasure trove of tone. For example, silk-and-steel strings can decrease string noise, but also lend a warm, 1960s folksy sound to your tone. The same goes for half-rouds. And nickel strings can be a warm alternative to bright 80/20 phosphor/bronze alloy strings. Or try a set of 92/8 phosphor/bronze strings. In general, heavy strings will produce a darker tone, but string gauge isn't the only consideration when choosing the right tone, and not every guitar can handle heavy strings. String tension is equally, if not more, relevant. Low- or mid-tension strings can enliven an older instrument, which may struggle with handling tension on the soundboard due to the age of the guitar. So many strings, so little time.



that I could play louder. But then my fingers were nowhere near as loud as my thumb. It took me a long time to discover acrylics [for my fingernails]. They don't wear away, and the tone is there as long as they last.



TIM BERTSCH

14 TIM BERTSCH,
SIX-STRING PLAYER, HARP GUITARIST

An old friend once told me every guitar has its song. I also believe every guitar has its optimum string and pick match. **Find the right strings for the right guitar, including creating hybrid sets that aren't available. (Got an unwound third?)** It's worth going down the rabbit hole and trying strings you will ultimately replace after 30 mins. My 1965 Gibson J-45 was always a challenge to find balance between the highs and lows. A few years back, at NAMM, I discovered the Martin Guitars Clapton signature strings—they're absolutely magical on the Gibson and I have found no equal. My nearly 100-year-old Washburn parlor guitar sounds best with silk and steels, my Breedlove loves DR [nickel] strings.

My checklist when I receive a new acoustic guitar includes removing the nut to lower it for better intonation, as well as evaluating the nut and saddle material. I have always been a fan of bone, with its direct crisp, transfer of sound, almost like a maple fingerboard. I have also thoughtfully planed braces inside some of my favorite acoustic guitars to give them more life. For my harp guitar, carefully cutting a line between my fretting and sub-bass strings on the bridge plate made all the difference in the world when it came to amplifying, separation, and transference of frequencies. I have also found that transcribing melodies from different instruments, such as mandolin, sitar, banjo, vibraphone, piano, and even horns (for example, John Coltrane and Miles Davis) has enlightened me to the need for different attacks on notes and nuances, such as ghost notes I had not realized on guitar previously.

And experiment with different pick materials and the pressure of the grip of the pick itself. Having started 34 years ago with very light picks, I eventually found myself drawn to the Dunlop stubby 3 mm. Although I have used this pick for years, I am finding inspiration for new songs with different pick materials, such as my Gypsy bone pick, horn material, and even a pick made from coconut shell a student made for me years ago. All extreme game changers on the acoustic guitar. I also use my thumbnail and the fleshy part of my index, middle, and ring finger to have options in color and tone on

compositions which need "bite" and "warmth."

Experimenting with different picking positions on the guitar, such as by the bridge or over the soundhole or even as far up as the 12th fret. These are great sources of tone choices as well. Also, I've found that I can create a softer dynamic by placing my hand in front of the soundhole while I am picking.

15 ERIC SKYE,
ACOUSTIC JAZZ GUITARIST

The important things as they relate to the instrument, in my view, are the setup and the strings.

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The striking of the strings is the only source of energy in the instrument, so clearly the fixed amount of tension in the strings is going to be a crucial factor in the way the wood resonates. Without getting into materials, and so on, unless you have a small vintage instrument you're concerned about structurally, or your aging hands require them, using anything lighter than standard light gauge—12 through 53-ish—is going to make your tone anemic. You need a certain amount of tension to get that wood moving.

How those strings sit on the instrument is also critical. **It's important to find a setup**

person in your area that you can develop a relationship with. They really need to watch and hear how you typically play, even just for a few minutes. Your personal right-hand attack should be a determining factor in how to approach the setup. Of course, we all want low action that is easy to play, but this robs you of volume, bass response, and likely introduces fret buzz. Many acoustic guitar players are also electric guitar players and want the transition to acoustic to be minimally noticeable. This, of course, is understandable, but the acoustic guitar is a different animal that operates in a different

way. You need a certain amount of space for that string to move around when it is struck. You have to find that personal sweet spot.

As for the player, the most important aspect of tone is your concept of tone, the way you idealize it in your head. Listen to recordings that resonate with you and try to hear them in your head as you play. Your hands can probably find it, or get close to it,



ERIC SKYE

by making many small unconscious adjustments in pressure and angle. If you're not hearing something in your head first—if you're just trusting that having the right gear will lead you there—good luck with that.

Also, the way you hold the guitar, allowing it to resonate more freely, affects the sound. As does your left hand, in terms of having clean finger placement, perhaps allowing strings to resonate longer. Holding down previously struck notes that you momentarily don't need to move, can encourage sympathetic ringing, and give you that natural reverb and more complex overtones. But, mostly, it's about your right hand, how you attack the strings. And what you attack with. Experimenting with picks, materials, and nail shapes is important, but also experiment with the angle at which those connect with the string, and where in the length of the string.

But, of course, the most important thing of all is listening. If your attention is mostly on fingerings, and so on, your sound will suffer. A singer can't help but pay attention to the sound that they're making, and guitar players have to train themselves to develop that continual awareness. You have to practice catching yourself when you drift away, and come back to the sound you're making. It's music, after all; it really is all about the sound you're making.

AG managing editor Whitney Phaneuf and senior editor Mark Kemp contributed to this article.

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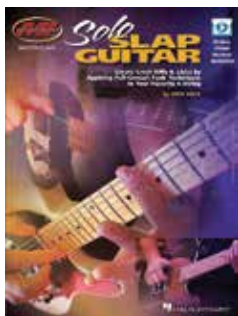
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42

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54

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HERE'S HOW

Guitar Yoga

4 steps to playing your instrument more mindfully

BY PAULINE FRANCE & JOSH BRILL

You're juggling so many things at once when playing guitar—rhythm, proper fingering, your inner critic, environmental distractions. It can be terribly overwhelming. But what if there is an easier way? A small shift in the way you approach the guitar can dramatically change the ease with which you play, how you feel, and how you perform.

Enter guitar yoga—a liberating, mindful approach to playing that uses the guitar as a tool for meditation. And nope, it doesn't involve any physical contortions—it's all in the mind.

Take these four steps to get more relaxed when practicing or performing.

1 IT'S NOT THE RESULTS, IT'S THE EXPERIENCE

Guitarists can be excessively self-critical when the focus is on sounding perfect, but

that mentality distracts you from being fully present in the moment.

While yoga is often associated with physical movements and stretching, guitar yoga practice is about creating mental clarity so that you can have a direct experience with your playing. Distracting thoughts, such as "I wish I were better" or "This sounds nothing like the song," can be quieted.

A good way to quiet those thoughts and become more present is through mindfulness. Practicing mindfulness with the guitar is as simple as directing your listening attention to the sound of your instrument.

TRY THIS:

First recognize that attention is a *choice*. Then choose to listen to the sound of the guitar rather than the thoughts in your head. If you notice

negative mental commentary, gently guide your attention back to the sound of your guitar.

2 IT'S NOT WHAT YOU PLAY, BUT HOW YOU PLAY IT

Humans have fast-paced, overactive minds cluttered with distractions, so slowing down can be a challenge. When you play slowly and with a connected awareness, you'll begin to savor each note. Suddenly, the songs you've been used to playing a certain way will sound and feel so much better.

Like learning to play guitar as a beginner, the art of slowing down is a skill that takes practice. An effective way to practice slowing down is by connecting your breath with the guitar. When you take long, deep breaths, you will begin to feel more relaxed and calm—now imagine doing that in synchronicity with your guitar notes.

An effective way to practice slowing down is by connecting your breath with the guitar.

TRY THIS:

Begin with the low open-E string on your guitar and play it with intention while allowing yourself to listen and focus on the sound for the duration of the string's vibration. Listen until you can't hear it anymore. Then take a few moments and listen to the silence *after* the note. Repeat three or more times.

Repeat the same steps, but this time as you play the note and listen, breathe in as long and deeply as possible. Wait until you can't hear the note anymore, then play the note as you exhale as long and deeply as possible.

You can practice this on all your open strings. As you do this meditation, begin to notice how relaxed you feel after you've completed the exercise.

3 LISTEN TO YOUR BODY AS YOU LISTEN TO THE MUSIC

People generally rely on their eyes and mind to play guitar, watching the fingers while anticipating what notes to play next. This chain of perception prevents you from listening deeply to the sound of the notes while staying present in the body. The more you are able to listen clearly to your sound, without distraction, the greater the connection you will make with what you're playing. That ultimately affects *how* you play.

TRY THIS:

Before you begin playing, take a moment to allow your hands to be still, and then bring your attention to the feeling *inside* your hands. With your hands relaxed on your lap, gently bring your awareness to the back of your right hand, the palm, and then through each finger beginning with the thumb, followed by the first, second, third, and fourth fingers. Repeat on your left hand. As you do this, you may begin to feel warmth inside your hands. It's important to take a moment and really feel the

hands from the inside, rather than just looking at or thinking about your hands.

4 DON'T TAKE YOURSELF SO SERIOUSLY

Playing guitar doesn't have to be a difficult, rigid experience. If it feels stressful, remember that it doesn't have to be that way—it can be easeful and soothing. When you practice guitar yoga, you're learning a calm, relaxed approach to the instrument that doesn't involve expectations.

Like any practice, mindfulness takes time and commitment, but it's worthwhile for a guitarist, because a relaxed mindset and mental clarity can result in more efficient practice sessions, increased retention, and more enjoyable music-making.

Pauline France is a journalist, guitar player, and guitar teacher dedicated to inspiring passion for the instrument.

Los Angeles-based guitarist Josh Brill is a mindfulness music coach and the founder of Yoga of Guitar. yogaofguitar.com

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AG guide *Acoustic Rock Basics:*
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LAITH ABUABDU

5 Tips on Using Arpeggios

Learn to play the broken chords that appear across the musical spectrum, from Baroque to classic rock

BY GRETCHEN MENN

THE PROBLEM

You're having difficulty keeping a steady flow when playing arpeggios—chords played melodically, rather than harmonically, which serve the dual function of establishing harmony and its movements while also providing melodic contour and interest. Arpeggios can be valuable technical exercises, as well as great tools for accompaniment. You can employ this technique on Led Zeppelin's "Babe I'm Gonna Leave You," Steve Morse's "Tumeni Notes," and Pink Floyd's "Us and Them," among others.

THE SOLUTION

Start with chord shapes you already know. Learn a handful of increasingly complex fingerstyle picking patterns and then begin incorporating arpeggios into your vocabulary. Both your rhythm and lead playing will benefit in the process, as will your compositional ability and overall musicianship.

1 START SLOWLY

Begin with your basic open-G chord, fretted with your second, first, and third fingers on strings 6, 5, and 1, respectively. Play the chord harmonically, as notated in bar 1 of Ex. 1, and then arpeggiated (bar 2). Fret the chord and leave it held in place. Play

through each note, letting it ring out as you move on to the next one. Try bar 2 fingerstyle and with any other chords as well.

2 ADD A CHORD

Now play Ex. 2, which introduces another chord, E minor (the vi chord in the key of G). Notice how you can hear the harmonic movement with the change of only one note (G major is G B D; E minor is E G B). In other words, B and G are common notes in both chords. It's always a good idea, by the way, to seek out smooth movement like this when playing arpeggiated chord progressions.

3 DELVE INTO SOME BASIC PICK-HAND PATTERNS

For Ex. 3 and its reverse pattern, Ex. 4, take the same two chords, G and E minor. Note that the right-hand fingering is indicated in traditional format: *a* = ring finger, *m* = middle, *i* = index, *p* = thumb. Pay attention to the individual sounds of each string and to various strengths and weaknesses in your pick hand. If you're new to fingerstyle technique, you'll likely find your ring finger is weaker than your middle or index. Let your ears be the guide to finding balanced volume and tone.

4 MIX IT UP WITH MORE PATTERNS

In Ex. 5, notice that the chords are the

same as in exercises 2–4, but because of a change of melodic direction and the rhythmic placement of the lowest note, the arpeggios start to take on a more melodic quality.

Ex. 6 extends the melodic workout introduced in Ex. 5 by introducing bass notes, played with the thumb, on the first and third beats of the measure. This adds fullness to the sound while helping reinforce the harmony.

5 BRING IN SOME BASS MOVEMENT

Ex. 7 demonstrates moving bass notes against stationary chords, creating graceful harmonic movement that is also graceful to play with its open strings.

Ex. 8 combines the pick-hand pattern and added bass notes of Ex. 6 and the chord progression of Ex. 7. The one addition is a D on the last beat of the second bar.

Once you've polished all of these examples, try some finger patterns of your own invention, as well as chord progressions that intrigue or move you. Create a new song, riff, solo, or symphony. The possibilities are endless.

Gretchen Menn is a guitarist and composer based in the San Francisco Bay Area. She writes, records, and performs original music and is a member of the popular Led Zeppelin tribute band Zepparella. gretchenmenn.com

Ex. 1

G

let ring throughout
(all examples)

Ex. 2

G

Ex. 3

Em G Em

a m i p etc.

Ex. 4

G Em

p i m a etc.

Ex. 5

G Em

a m i p p i m i etc.

Ex. 6

G

a m i p i m a m etc.

p

Ex. 7

Em G G/F# Em C C/B Am7

p i m a etc.

Ex. 8

G G/F# Em C C/B Am7 D

a m i i m a m etc.

p

George Benson



Melody of Rhythm

6 steps to playing the guitar more musically

BY ADAM RAFFERTY

The more musically you play, the more you will touch your listener's hearts. But what does it mean to play "more musically?" Music is essentially a flow of melody and groove. Whether you're playing rock, jazz, bossa-nova, classical, or funk, a flow of melody and groove is always present. So, playing more musically just means going with the flow.

First, rid yourself of a couple of fallacies. Playing musically is often confused with playing with emotion or feeling. If all you needed were feelings, everyone on the planet would be a musical genius. What you want is to play with intuition, rather than intellect. To hone your

musical intuition, you must play slowly, paying close attention to specific details. In time, those details will settle and become automatic.

Another fallacy is that more gear will get you there. New guitars, pedals, pickups, strings, effects, alternate tunings, faster technique, special picks, crazy capos—all make little difference in how musical you sound. On the other hand, the following will make a huge difference: your sense of melody and groove; your ability to listen and incorporate the real "blue" part of the blues into your playing; your touch and tone; and your patience for practicing slowly.

Try these six tips to make your playing more musical:

1 DEVELOP A SENSE OF MELODY

The simple test for figuring out your sense of melody is to ask yourself: Can I sing what I am playing? The great jazz player George Benson can play an entire improvised solo and sing along with it note-for-note. His fingers are not just "doing the walking."

Whether it's a blues solo, jazz solo, or fingerstyle arrangement, you should always be able to sing the melody you are playing. It's a special connection.



TRY THIS:

Play and sing the melody in **Ex. 1** at the same time.

signatures. By practicing on a drum, you will notice that your touch and tone on the guitar will start to “sparkle” in a new way.

along with the original recording of “Higher Ground” or “Isn’t She Lovely” by Stevie Wonder. This will help you develop body rhythm.

2 FIND YOUR GROOVE

Whether it’s rock, country, techno, blues, jazz, funk, or some crazy subgenre, most music today is influenced by African rhythm. I practice a 12/8 African groove on a hand drum and have a specific way to count different time

TRY THIS:

Play the 12/8 rhythm in **Ex. 2** on a hand drum or djembe. (You can do it on your legs if you have no drum.) The hands always alternate right-left-right-left, and so on—count “1-2-3-4” out loud (where shown) as you play. For fun, practice this

3 HONE YOUR LISTENING

Have you ever heard your own speaking voice on a recording and been surprised at how it sounds? The same is true for your guitar playing. Often you know exactly what you’re playing, but when you hear it back—whoa! It sounds different.

Ex. 1

Ex. 2

Ex. 3

Ex. 4a

Ex. 4b

Ex. 5

The simple test for figuring out your sense of melody is to ask yourself: Can I sing what I am playing?

TRY THIS:

In Ex. 3, do the following experiment to activate your “listening” while you play. Fret a G note—the high E string at third fret. Play the note and let it fade to silence, and follow the sound with full concentration. Next, strum up a G chord very slowly with your bare thumb. Can you make the top note pop out like a melody, and just a tad louder and more bell-like than the rest of the chord?

If you have a smartphone, use the voice memo app to record yourself practicing, then listen back. It's a super tool.

4 DEVELOP YOUR BLUES FEEL

The blues is more than a style, scale, or set of licks. It's a whole set of musical physics. Being “plugged in” to the blues will make any type of pop, rock, country, jazz, funk, and

other genres sound better. Even modern pop singers, such as Justin Timberlake and Adele, have a sense of the blues in the way they sing, although you don't think of them as blues artists.

TRY THIS:

Ex. 4a and Ex. 4b will help you realize your blues feel. Ultimately, you'll have to use your ears and guts and go more deeply than what you see in the written example. Play both melodies and compare. Can you get really bluesy with the second one?

5 EXPLORE YOUR TOUCH AND TONE IN THE HIGHER REGISTER

It's easy to get a good sound on lower strings, but when you play single notes in the higher register, the sound can be weak, thin, quiet, or scratchy. The reason for this is simple: It's easy to play faster with a thin sound, and most guitarists like ease and speed. But classical and jazz players pay a lot of attention to getting high notes on the guitar to sound bell-like, with a satisfying, rounded front-end attack and tone.

TRY THIS:

Play the melody in Ex. 5 first with the flesh of your thumb, which is your fattest sound. Then play it with your pick-hand fingers or a flatpick. How do the sounds compare? Can you improve the tone of the fingers or pick to get it more like the thumb sound?

6 PRACTICE SLOWLY

“Practice makes permanent, not perfect.” With that in mind, practice slowly. Every time you try to play too fast, it's like opening the oven to see if the cake is finished yet.

The remedy? Allow yourself to get to the place where you enjoy practicing slowly. By doing that, you'll be repeating only the correct motions and not reinforcing the wrong motions. After that, playing fast and accurately will feel much easier.

Now, rock on, and get to work!

Adam Rafferty is a fingerstyle guitarist from New York City who tours worldwide. Learn more at adamrafferty.com or at his online lesson site studywithadam.com.



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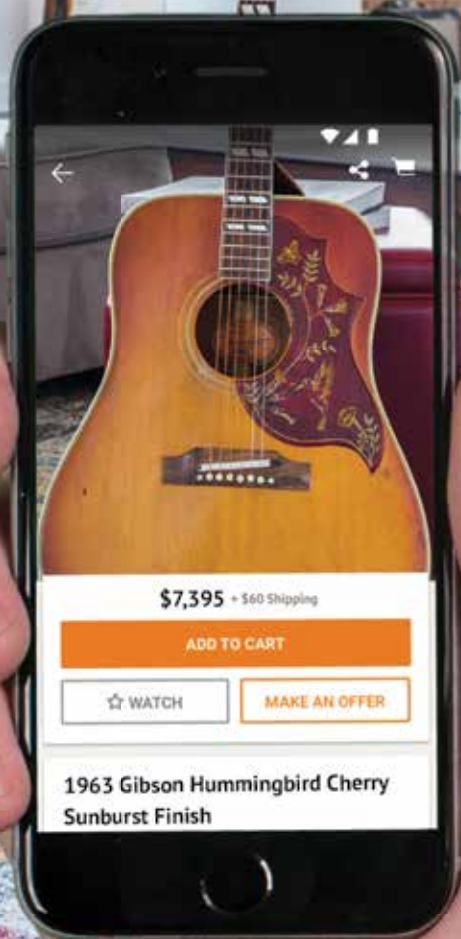
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How Low Can You Go?

Too many guitarists at the jam session? Play bass on your guitar

BY JEFFREY PEPPER RODGERS

You see it at just about every jam, whether in the living room or the festival parking lot: the wall of guitars. Almost everyone holds a flattop guitar, and when someone kicks off a song, the air fills with six-strings ringing out the same chords. Best-case scenario, people listen to each other, hold down a solid rhythm, and don't drown out the singing or instrumental solos. Worst case—the cumulative sound is like a slow-motion train wreck with a familiar song playing in the background.

But, you play guitar, and that's the instrument you have at the jam. What to do? One approach is to figure out a part in a different register. If everyone's strumming open chords in G, for instance, you could put a capo at the fifth fret and use shapes in the key of D instead. A better idea might be to skip the

chords entirely and simply play bass lines on your guitar. Even if there's an actual bass player at the session, you can add a lot to the groove and feel of songs by working the low end on guitar. And when you're playing with just one other guitarist, focusing on bass lines can enhance the sound without overlapping the other person's part.

In this Weekly Workout, you'll practice some techniques for playing bass on guitar, from alternating roots/fifths and bass runs to octaves and the walking bass, using the chord progressions from some perennial jam-session favorites.

WEEK ONE

If you use the classic boom-chuck style on the guitar, you're already playing bass while covering chords as well—the boom is the

bass and the chuck is the strummed chord. So how about just taking out the chords and spotlighting the bass? That's what you'll do this week in a common chord progression similar to the one used in a song that's been at the top of the jam-session charts for a while now: "Wagon Wheel," by Old Crow Medicine Show and Bob Dylan. It's nothing fancy: I–V–vi–IV and then I–V–IV in the key

Beginners' Tip #1

If you play with a pick, try muting the bass strings on Week One's examples by resting your palm on the bridge to get a little more thump.



WEEK 1

Ex. 1

A E F#m D A E D

Ex. 2

A E F#m D A E D

WEEK 2

Ex. 3

G Bm C G G Bm C G

Ex. 4

G D C G D C G D C

Ex. 5

G G/F# Em D C G G/F# Em D C

of A (often played on guitar in G shapes with a capo at the second fret).

In Ex. 1, simply alternate between the root and the fifth for each chord. On the A chord, play A (root) and E (fifth); on the E chord, play E (root) and B (fifth), and so on. You can use a flatpick or your thumb, or alternate your index and middle fingers, as many bass players do. Although the notation mostly shows half notes, if you listen closely to bass players you'll notice they often leave spaces between notes to create more rhythmic bounce. To get that sound, cut the notes short by muting them (see Basics in the August 2016 issue). It's easier to mute fretted strings than open

strings, so when playing bass you might opt for fretted notes, as in measures 7–8, where you grab D and A at the fifth fret even though you could use open strings.

Take another pass through the progression (Ex. 2), this time adding some short, quarter-note bass runs for a little more movement. In “Wagon Wheel,” you could play a part like this on the chorus and then go back to the straight alternating bass for the verses, to add contrast between sections.

WEEK TWO

In addition to roots and fifths, bass players use lots of octaves, so that's the focus this

Beginners' Tip #2

Notice the staccato marks (dots) in the notation for Week Two—play these notes shorter than written.

week. The progression here is similar to “The Weight,” by the Band, played in the key of G..

In Ex. 3 and Ex. 4, patterned after the verse and chorus, play the octaves sequentially—the low note and then an octave up. But in the second-to-last bar of Ex. 4, lay the octaves together; you can pick the individual

WEEK 3

Ex. 6

Drop-D Tuning: D A D G B E

Ex. 7



Chord progression: A D G A D

WEEK 4

Ex. 8

Swing (♩=♩♩)

Chord progression: Am7 Bm7 Am7 Bm7 Am7 Bm7 Am7 Bm7 Am7 Bm7 Am7 Bm7 Am7 Bm7

Chord progression: Am7 Dm Am Dm Am Dm

Ex. 9

Chord progression: Am Dm E7 Am Dm Am Dm Am Dm

Chord progression: Am Dm Am Dm Am Dm Am Dm E7

WEEKLY WORKOUT

strings fingerstyle or, if you're using a flatpick, mute the string in between.

The octaves continue in **Ex. 5**, inspired by the interlude of "The Weight," where they sound particularly good with the descending line from G to C.

WEEK THREE

This week, practice a common bass pattern that uses roots, thirds, and fifths. To dial in the rhythm, count the eighth notes as 1-2-3, 1-2-3, 1-2, and play a bass note on each 1. It's an easygoing, relaxed feel—perfect for a song like Jimmy Buffett's "Margaritaville," which is similar to this week's workout.

First, tune to drop D. Since the progression is in D, you'll be able to make good use of that

low D on the sixth string. I also use drop D to play bass lines in other keys, like G or A—that extra bit of range makes a big difference.

The verse of "Margaritaville" sits on the same chords for a long time, similar to **Ex. 6**, so this moving bass line really helps to liven up the sound of static strumming. For most of the example, play a root-third-fifth pattern, with a few variations and some connecting bass runs, as in **Ex. 7**, which nods to the chorus.

WEEK FOUR

Finally, practice the walking bass—moving on nearly every beat. Put on your shades and think upright bass for this week's cool patterns, which are similar to what you hear in Van Morrison's "Moondance."

In the first seven measures of the verse, the chords bounce back and forth between Am7 and Bm7. Play **Ex. 8**, depicting a bunch of variations that you can mix and match to create your own line. Then, in measure 8, walk up to the Dm and keep on going through measure 14.

Ex. 9 takes its cue from the chorus, in which the chord changes between Am and Dm

go twice as fast. Anticipate both chords by playing the roots an eighth note before beats 1 and 3. Also, in the last bar of both **Ex. 8** and **Ex. 9**, add a little left to your E bass notes by doubling them at the octave.

Playing bass lines on guitar has benefits beyond the public service of making jam sessions sound better. It'll make you more conscious of your guitar's low end, which is healthy even when you're playing chords, too. And, when there's a call for an actual bass player for a jam, concert, or recording session, you're primed for the gig. Just carry your bass lines right over from your guitar. After all, those big fat basses are tuned the same as the bottom four strings on your flattop. **AG**

Beginners' Tip #3

Stay in position throughout for Week Three, with your first, second, third, and fourth fingers covering the notes on frets 2, 3, 4, and 5, respectively.

Beginners' Tip #4

In Week Four, for the eighth rests in the chords, you'll need to mute the open fourth string by touching it with your fretting fingers.



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Blue-Eyed Soul

Learn to play the popular Ed Sheeran song that borrows from an R&B classic

BY ADAM PERLMUTTER

Last August, the young English singer-songwriter Ed Sheeran became the latest musician to find himself as the defendant in a music-copyright lawsuit. He was accused of appropriating the 1973 Marvin Gaye/Ed Townsend song “Let’s Get It On” for “Thinking Out Loud,” which won a 2016 Grammy for Song of the Year.

It’s debatable whether this is a case of plagiarism—there is, after all, a finite number of chord progressions—but the similarities between the Sheeran song and Gaye’s 1970s classic are undeniable. If you put a capo on

your guitar at the first fret, the main riff of “Thinking Out Loud” (shown here in notation) neatly corresponds to that of “Let’s Get It On,” harmonically as well as rhythmically.

What’s not debatable is the strength of the melody, or the song’s seductive appeal. Sheeran plays the original hit version of “Thinking Out Loud” on an electric guitar, but it works as well on an acoustic, either finger-style or with a pick and fingers. (You can watch Sheeran do an acoustic version of the song in his 2014 episode of *Acoustic Guitar Sessions* at acousticguitar.com/sessions.)



BEN WATTS

Ed Sheeran

Key to playing that cool, funky riff is nailing the laidback rhythmic feel and landing on the chords at just the right time—notice that the D/F# and A chords fall on the “and” of beat 2. These chords are preceded by muted accents: Where you see the Xs in notation, just release the fret-hand pressure, so that the strings make a percussive sound when you pick them.

After you’ve learned “Thinking Out Loud,” if you’re a Marvin Gaye fan, it should be easy for you to tackle “Let’s Get It On”: two hit songs for the price of one.

AC

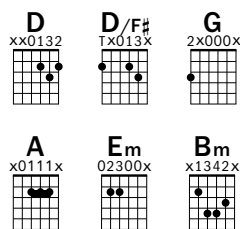
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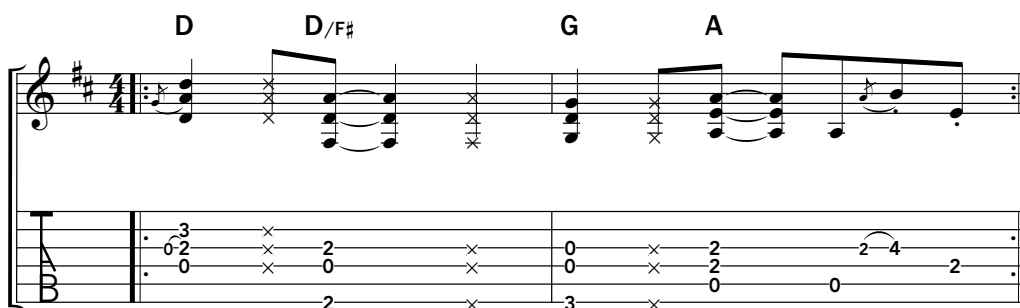
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Chords



Main Riff/Chord Progression



D D/F# G A
1. When your legs don't work like they used to before

D D/F# G A
And I can't sweep you off of your feet

D D/F# G A
Will your mouth still remember the taste of my love

D D/F# G A
Will your eyes still smile from your cheeks

Pre-Chorus

D D/F# G A D D/F# G A
And darling I will be loving you till we're 70

D D/F# G A D D/F#
And baby my heart could still fall as hard at 23

G A Em A D
And I'm thinking 'bout how people fall in love in mysterious ways

Em A
Maybe just the touch of a hand

Em A Bm
Well me I fall in love with you every single day

Em A
And I just wanna tell you I am

Chorus

D D/F# G
So honey now

A D D/F# G
Take me into your loving arms

A D D/F# G
Kiss me under the light of a thousand stars

A D D/F#
Place your head on my beating heart

G A
I'm thinking out loud

Bm A G D/F# Em A D
Maybe we found love right where we are

2. When my hair's all but gone and my memory fades
And the crowds don't remember my name
When my hands don't play the strings the same way
I know you will still love me the same

Pre-Chorus

'Cause honey your soul could never grow old it's evergreen
And baby your smile's forever in my mind and memory
I'm thinking 'bout how people fall in love in mysterious ways
Maybe it's all part of a plan
Well I continue making the same mistakes
Hoping that you'll understand

Repeat Chorus

Guitar Solo (use verse progression)

Repeat Chorus

Tag

Bm A G D/F# Em A D
Well baby we found love right where we are

Bm A G D/F# Em A D
And we found love right where we are

True Colours

Here's the correct way to play
a mid-1960s classic by Donovan

BY ADAM PERLMUTTER

Donovan may be best known for psychedelic pop hits like “Mellow Yellow,” but he’s long been a folkie at heart. For evidence, just listen to his 1965 song “Colours,” with its gentle acoustic strumming and string-bass reinforcement.

“Colours” is a simple, five-verse tune, built from the I, IV, and V chords in the key of E major. Many musicians assume it’s played with the cowboy chords E, A, and B. But a peek under the hood reveals the song is played in open-D tuning (DADF#AD), in the key of D major, with a second-fret capo

causing it to sound a major second higher. (Accordingly, all the notation here sounds a second higher than written.)

The most difficult part of “Colours” is its intro, which features some fancy picking. Donovan decorates a single-note melody with open-string strums. Use your first finger for the hammer-on in bar 1 and your second for the hammer-ons elsewhere. If the intro is at first too difficult, try learning the melody, with or without the hammer-ons, before adding the strums.

The rest of the tune is straightforward.



Donovan

Since you’re in open D, you can play the I chord (D) using the open strings, and a first-finger barre across all six strings has you covered for the IV and V chords (G and A). To match the basic strumming pattern on the original recording, try the rhythm suggested here in notation. Keep your pick hand moving continuously up and down in sixteenth notes, but only make contact with the strings on the indicated beats. As with any song, play along with the recording and it will help you recreate the song’s rhythmic feel. **AC**



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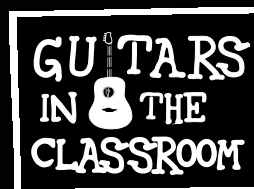
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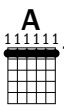
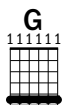
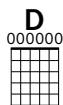


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Tuning: D A D F# A D

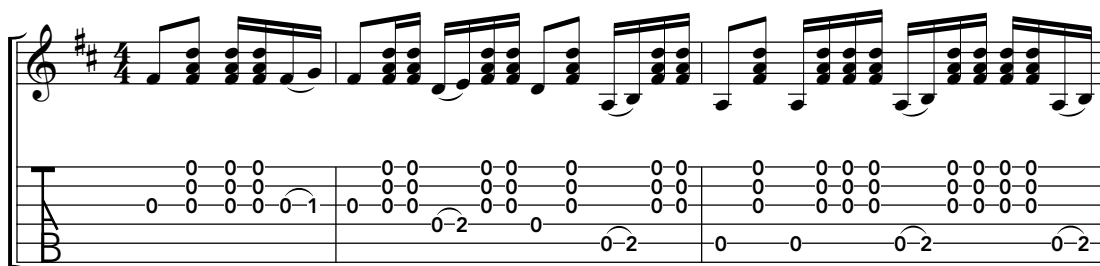
Intro

Chords, Capo II



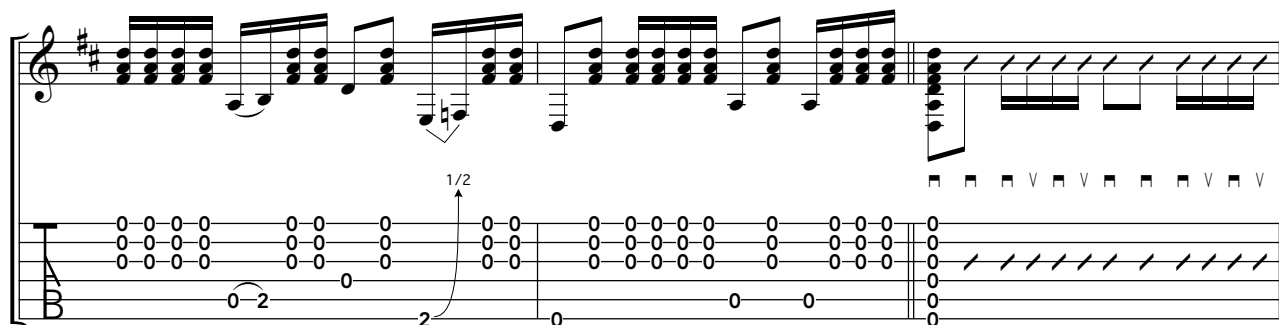
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D



Strumming Pattern

D



D

1. Yellow is the color of my true love's hair

G

D

In the mornin' when we rise

G

D

In the mornin' when we rise

A

G

That's the time, that's the time

D

I love the best

2. Blue's the color of the sky
In the mornin' when we rise
In the mornin' when we rise
That's the time, that's the time
I love the best

3. Green's the color of the sparklin' corn
In the mornin' when we rise
In the mornin' when we rise
That's the time, that's the time
I love the best

4. Mellow is the feelin' that I get
When I see her, mm hmm
When I see her, uh huh
That's the time, that's the time
I love the best

Interlude (use verse progression)

5. Freedom is a word I rarely use
Without thinkin', mm hmm
Without thinkin', uh huh
Of the time, of the time
When I've been loved



Hebrew Lessons

How Tim Sparks worked out a klezmer-inspired John Zorn piece on solo guitar

BY MARK ARI

In 1993, the composer and saxophonist John Zorn introduced *Masada*—both a songbook and a quartet, in which he filtered Jewish melodies through a free-jazz lens. The *Masada* concept might seem far removed from fingerstyle guitar, but a decade later Zorn approached Tim Sparks to arrange some of these tunes for solo guitar.

"Zorn faxed me a whole bunch of charts and said, 'Pick whatever you like,'" Sparks says. "He also encouraged me to play the way I play, using whatever I wanted." For Sparks that means drawing on blues, classical, jazz, klezmer, and various Eastern European and Middle Eastern styles, as is heard on his arrangements on the 2003 album *Masada Guitars* (Tzadik), also featuring interpretations by guitarists Marc Ribot and Bill Frisell.

Sparks' take on "Sippur," with its tricky timing, is a standout track. "Ever since I released that recording of the *Nutcracker Suite* [in 1993], I've been into odd-metered songs," Sparks says. "'Sippur' really has unusual rhythms. The A section is in 11/4, and the B section is in 4/4."

To make the tune easier to play on the guitar, Sparks transposes it from the original, horn-friendly key of F major down to E. He fleshes out the melody in the A section by adapting Greg Cohen's bass line from *Masada: Live in Middelheim*, playing it on the guitar with his thumb.

For the rhythm in the B section, Sparks uses the staggered bass line of *baïão* (pronounced bi-yow—a Brazilian rhythm he first explored in "Eu So Quero Um Xodo" on the album *One String Follows Another*). "I find a lot of times when I'm arranging an odd-metered song and trying to use



Tim Sparks

a steady 4/4 thumb beat, like a Travis pattern, it just gets really complicated," Sparks says. "Playing a skippy sort of thing like that little *baïão* allows it all to fall together a lot more easily."

After the A and B sections, Sparks improvises, using ideas merging klezmer music with blues and modern jazz. According to the guitarist, "Sippur" is actually quite hard to play. Arranging it for guitar is the process of making that feasible. "But it's not like I'm inventing anything," he says. "It's like solving a Rubik's Cube."

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Moderately Fast

Head

A

E

Musical notation for section A, measure 1. Treble clef, key of E major (three sharps), 4/4 time. The melody consists of eighth and quarter notes. The bass line is a single line with fret numbers: 0, 0, 7, 7, 0, 7, 0, 7. A 1/4 note pickup is indicated at the end.

Musical notation for section A, measure 2. Treble clef, key of E major (three sharps), 4/4 time. The melody continues with eighth and quarter notes. The bass line is a single line with fret numbers: 0, 0, 7, 7, 0, 7, 0, 7. A 1/4 note pickup is indicated at the end.

B

G7

E7

G7

Musical notation for section B, measures 3-5. Treble clef, key of E major (three sharps), 4/4 time. The melody consists of eighth and quarter notes. The bass line is a single line with fret numbers: 0, 0, 7, 7, 0, 7, 0, 7. A 1/4 note pickup is indicated at the end.

Am

B \flat

Gmaj7/B

B \flat

Fmaj7/A

A \flat maj13D/F \sharp G(\flat 9)

9

A

E

13

15

Solo

E7

17



Em9

19

Bm A9 E7

21

Am7

25

Gm7 Dm13 Fmaj7 G

28

Em(maj7)

31

32

Bm A7

33

B/E

C/G

D/E

34



35

E7alt E7

39

Am7 G/B Fmaj7 #11 F G

Interlude

43

E

45

Solo

47 **Em7** **G** **A**

49 **E7** **E7**

51 **E** **G** **A** **G/B** **A11/C#** **Dadd4** **Em7** **Dadd4** **E7#9/D**

54 **Am7** **Gm13** **F7#9** **Fmaj9**



58

E7 B5 A E7 G A

60

E7 B5 A E7 G G# A

Outro Head

B

62

E7 G7 E7 G7

66

Am Bb Gmaj7/B Bb Fmaj7/A Abmaj13 D/F# G(b9)

A

E

70

72

A7 A7#11

rit.

1/4

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BY SCOTT WIGGARD

70

Ask the Expert
What is the
ideal humidity?

72

New Gear
Small wonder:
Bourgeois L-DBO

74

New Gear
A real performer:
Martin GPC15ME

76

New Gear
Ovation 50th
Anniversary LTD

AG TRADE

MIKE ENGLISH



In his element:
Roger Bucknall

MAKERS & SHAKERS

Wood, Sweat & Tears

UK luthier Roger Bucknall of Fylde Guitars finds his muse in his high-profile clientele

BY JULIE BERGMAN

I could spend all my life in a forest,” says Roger Bucknall, who is practically doing just that. He and his wife Moira have planted nearly 1,000 native hardwoods around their country home on the outskirts of Penrith, in the northwest England county of Cumbria, surrounded by the rolling green dales of the spectacular Lake District.

There’s a reason Bucknall likes all those native hardwoods nearby: He’s the luthier behind Fylde Guitars, one of the most revered instrument companies in the United Kingdom and beyond. But he also likes to have friends nearby. When he invites Fylde customers into his living room for a bit of scotch and music, he and his wife enjoy taking in the sounds and

magic of what he has created. But if Bucknall appears to be just enjoying the company, he’s actually doing much more: He listens intently to the instruments—for the attack of the strings, for a uniform sound across the upper and lower ranges—and analyzes the relationship between the construction and response of the guitars to the styles of the players.

Give Bucknall a forest to build with and exceptional artists to build *for*, and he’s a happy man. His motivation is “to make my living amongst piles of incredible wood,” he says, “using the weird and wonderful skills and experience I’ve been lucky enough to have, and to fulfill the wishes of so many players that I admire.”

If strong motivation is the life blood of a successful creator, 66-year-old Bucknall has that at his core. He has the heart of a musician, the skills of an engineer, and the mind of an inventor. But it’s Bucknall’s love of music and deep respect for musicians that has driven him to be one of the most celebrated instrument builders in the UK. He has been widely recognized as such not only by the musicians he serves, but by his recent inclusion in the Queen’s 2016 Honors List, having been made a Member of the British Empire (MBE) for his contribution to guitar-building and music.

Bucknall’s relationship with music and musicians is central to everything he has done in his 40-plus years of making guitars

and various Celtic instruments for both budding artists and the elite of acoustic music. Building guitars sprang from his early involvement with playing guitar and wood-working. He constructed his first guitar at age nine in his father's garage. In 1973, he opened a small shop in the basement of a tailor's shop on the northwest coast of England in the Borough of Fylde, Lancashire—the hamlet that gave his company its name. At its peak, Fylde's output swelled to 1,000 guitars a year, but production slowed during the '80s synth-pop era. Now, Bucknall builds about 120 instruments each year in his Cumbrian shop. In all, as a professional builder, he has produced more than 9,000 instruments.

Initially, Bucknall supplied most of the top players in the UK folk scene, as his guitars were ideal for the emerging fingerstyle and open tunings of the 1970s. Over the years, his guitars have been heralded by such top players as Bob Dylan, Martin Carthy, John Renbourn, Nic Jones, John Doyle, John Martyn, Beverly Martyn, Happy Traum, Davey Graham, Eric Bibb, and many others. Rock and jazz players have caught on, too—those who have owned or used Fylde instruments include Paul McCartney, Pete Townshend, Mick Jagger, Keith Richards, Nancy Wilson, Sting, David Spinozza, Al DiMeola, and Stanley Clark. And a new generation of Fylde players has emerged, including guitarists John Smith, Lisa Hannigan, Ben Walker, Will McNicol, and Megan Henwood. “That has always been my main interest—to see my ‘babies’ played by my guitar heroes,” Bucknall says.

He can come across as serious, a bit gruff even, as he dons goggles and moves around the workbench. But that seriousness evaporates later over a pint in the local pub, where patrons seem to know his work.

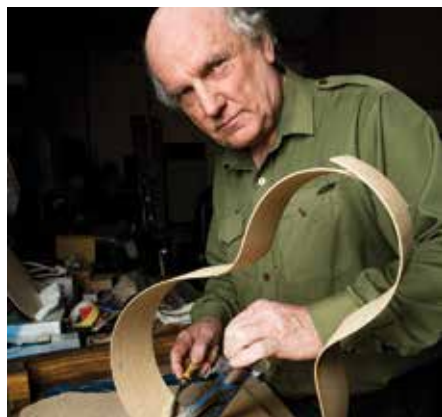
From his youth, Bucknall was enthralled by making things, through engineering, fine woodwork, pottery, and weaving. He obtained a university degree in mechanical engineering, and studied musical acoustics, while designing industrial tape recorders. On the side, he played guitar, fiddle, mandolin, and banjo in local folk clubs, where he met many of his eventual friends and customers.

Bucknall describes himself as an unfulfilled musician, but a qualified engineer. His knowledge of electronics, materials science, design, acoustics, and tool making converge in his instruments. He is driven by a fascination of human skills and machinery, but in most of his work, he still seeks the individuality of hands-on craftsmanship. When giving a

guided tour of the towering stacks of tone-woods in the loft of his shop, his excitement for the raw materials of his trade takes centerstage. “I can shape a neck by hand much quicker than a CNC machine,” he says. “I love wood, I love metal, but I have come to love the flexibility of working by hand.”

When Bucknall started making guitars, there were few other makers in England, so he was primarily self-taught, which led him to invent and experiment while still honoring the masters who came before him, particularly C. F. Martin. “I feel strongly that a guitar maker should try and contribute something of his own, and not simply follow other people's ideas,” he says.

Bucknall sees no limit to how “good” a guitar can be or sound, or how far he can push



MIKE ENGLISH

Bucknall has the heart of a musician, the skills of an engineer, and the mind of an inventor.

his own standards. Fylde guitars are respected not only for their tone and playability, but also the perfection that is evident in the entire building process, from the choice of woods to the design, bracing, construction, finishing, and setup. Bucknall works with a small staff now, including Moira, in the office, and two shop assistants, who under his direction make the components and assembly look as precise as if done by machine. He compares his work to that of the famed British watchmaker George Daniels, who wanted every part to look as if it had never been touched by human hands. “We do at least 95 percent of the work by hand,” Bucknall says. “The only thing made by machine is the truss-rod cover.”

While dedicated to the simplicity of hand work, Bucknall doesn't go in for a lot of

detailed inlay on his instruments. “I recognize the art and skill of inlay, but I am always under pressure to get instruments made, and any extra decoration holds me back,” he says. “I keep purfling and binding very simple, allowing the colors and grains to speak for themselves. No stains, no fillers.”

Bucknall has a massive stock of timber, far more than most guitar makers. His instruments range from his original Oberon model with a wide finger-board and 24 ¾-inch scale length, to smaller bodied slotted-headstock models, cutaways, and everything in between. Fylde has 16 standard-model guitars offered on his website. Mandolin family instruments include a mando with a slightly longer and wider fretboard suited to guitar players, octave mandolas, eight-string bouzoukis, and ten-string citterns.

He uses standard top and side woods, but also builds with materials ranging from exotic snakewoods and sinker redwood to Macassar Ebony and oak whiskey casks.

It is Bucknall's personal association with musicians, though, that remains crucial to the way he stretches himself as a builder. From the day his career path took him toward building instead of performing, the players of Bucknall's instruments have been his muses, and he theirs, as many artists attest in *Wood, Sweat and Tears*, an illustrated book on Fylde Guitars published in 2015.

One of those artists is Eric Bibb, who recalls being backstage some years ago with the Malian guitarist Habib Koité. “My Godin-playing West African brother asked if he could try my Fylde,” Bibb writes. “I handed it over and was delighted to see the look on his face as he played my favorite guitar.” A few years later, Bibb and Koité were headed out on a tour in support of an album they'd recorded together. “I made one of those ‘I know it's short notice’ calls to my dear friend Roger,” Bibb writes, explaining Bucknall's quick turnaround and thoughtful choice of materials for the two musicians. “The result was twin guitars—one for Habib and one for me—with cedar tops and African timber back and sides.”

A lot of Bucknall's work is focused on custom orders. Some are unusual, like the 12-string lute and doubleneck guitar Bucknall built for Deep Purple guitar legend Ritchie Blackmore, who now performs Renaissance-style acoustic folk music. Those are the challenges that keep Bucknall inspired. “I couldn't keep it going if I didn't have that variety,” Bucknall says of his work, adding modestly, “and if I didn't have such a good team around me.” **AC**

There Is a Cure for the Wintertime Blues

The chilly season can bring potentially harmful low humidity to your home (and guitar). But there is a fix

BY MAMIE MINCH

Q What is the ideal humidity level for a guitar? Do all woods require the same level of humidity? Do laminates need the same levels?

—Ted Hechtman, Brooklyn, New York

A With the advent of winter, along with the ensuing use of dry heat to warm your house, it's time to have a conversation about the potentially detrimental effects of humidity. Maintaining your guitar's humidity level is key in avoiding lots of headaches, from a fluctuating setup to potentially expensive structural repairs. While it might sound like a hassle, it's pretty simple to put into practice. The driest time of year varies from one area of the world to another, but most of us need to think about it when the heat goes on and the air in our homes is much drier. Did you ever wake up with a dry mouth or irritated sinuses in the winter? Imagine how unhappy that makes your guitar!

You can start by considering where you generally keep the guitar. In a way, it's really safest to stash a guitar in its case—no enthusiastic tail wagging will knock it off its stand, no tipsy dinner guest will take it off the wall to show you their Chuck Berry impression. (Wait, that's just *my* friends?) Personally, I find that I'm always more likely to pick up a guitar and play when I have one out and ready, and that's the most important thing to me, so I keep my beat-up 1930s



Kalamazoo hanging on the wall in my living room year round. But that makes it subject to the dry humidity.

It helps to know the relative humidity of the place where you keep your instrument. Buying an inexpensive digital hygrometer is a smart way to check humidity—I keep one on a bookshelf—near my hanging guitar. A good set of numbers to aspire to is 50 percent humidity at 70 degrees. Many of us would have a hard time making that a reality, so do what you can—generally 40–60 percent humidity is optimal. To help maintain that level, I keep an inexpensive humidifier running in that room in the driest months. Once you get into the habit, it's not hard to remember to refill the humidifier each day—in fact, I notice that I feel better with a higher relative humidity in the air, too!

If you will be keeping your guitar closed in its case, the concerns are a little different. There are lots of great in-case humidifiers available and some cases even have them built in to the lid. The gel-based ones are fantastic in that you have to think about them less often—just be careful when refilling them, and be sure to check on them every once in a while to make sure none of the gel has tipped out. The sponge variety are probably the safest, but they absolutely need to be refilled every two to three days—you don't want a dry sponge in

your guitar sucking up the moisture, since that would be counterproductive.

So do all guitars need to be humidity maintained? Yes, even solid-body electrics and acoustic guitars with laminate or composite back and sides need a helping hand. For one, they all have wooden necks and fingerboards—a telltale sign of dryness is your fret ends poking out when a fingerboard shrinks. Many newer guitars with composite backs and sides still have a solid wood top, a wooden bridge, and a wooden fingerboard—all of which can crack and separate when they fluctuate at different rates with humidity change. Some guitars will be more sensitive to humidity changes than others—those guitars, especially new ones constructed with kiln-dried wood, go through a more sensitive first few seasons and then become more stable.

The takeaway is that, yes, you should humidify your guitar, and no, it's not that complicated. Once you have that under control, you can get back to the good part: playing it.

Buying an inexpensive digital hygrometer is a smart way to check humidity—I keep one on a bookshelf near my hanging guitar.



Mamie Minch

GOT A QUESTION?

Uncertain about guitar care and maintenance? The ins-and-outs of guitar building? Or a topic related to your gear?

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Small Wonder

A little guitar from Bourgeois delivers an authentic old-school sound—and much more

BY ADAM PERLMUTTER

The Bourgeois L-DBO's strong voice and shimmering reverb inspires an approach that's different from normal, requiring fewer notes to say more with its luxurious tone.

The latest in Maine luthier Dana Bourgeois' line of fine steel-string guitars, the L-DBO is a wonderful instrument. On the surface, it's a tribute to inexpensive prewar flattops like Gibson's L-00. The guitar has a sass that works well for country-blues fingerpicking, and in a blindfold test you'd swear it was 80 years old.

But the L-DBO feels like a whole lot more guitar than its original benchmark. For one,

it's incredibly playable compared with many vintage examples. The neck has Bourgeois' trademark profile, super comfortable with a gentle V shape that's ample, but not cumbersome. The action is moderately low and the guitar is set up for a range of techniques and approaches.

Even more impressive is the guitar's depth of sound. The notes have a lively, three-dimensional quality, whether picked or strummed. It's a particularly responsive instrument and has an almost symphonic range of tonal colors: a small-bodied boutique guitar

with a much broader range of applications than its old-school appearance suggests.

THE OLD & THE NEW

Vintage acoustic guitars are prized for their color and responsiveness, and—in what is no mean feat—Bourgeois has captured these attributes uncannily with the L-DBO. It is part of the company's Aged Tone series that comes with a torrefied top, meaning the Adirondack red spruce used for the soundboard has been baked so that it behaves like it's been aging for decades. The guitar was assembled with hide glue, which many luthiers find better than modern adhesives for the transfer of sound. A super-thin Aged Tone (cyanoacrylic) finish, mimicking decades-old nitrocellulose lacquer, completes the package.

Bourgeois also has rendered the perfect vintage sunburst finish, ranging from a warm, dark brown to a rich, deep amber. (The guitar is also available in a natural or opaque black finish.) Other details, including nickel Waverly tuners with ivoroid buttons, add to the instrument's old-school vibe while lending modern performance. The L-DBO, like all Bourgeois guitars, has a bolt-on neck



A small-bodied boutique guitar at its very best, one with a much broader range of applications than its old-school appearance suggests.

that allows for an easier reset than a traditional glued-in dovetail joint.

The craftsmanship on the L-DBO is stunning. The fretwork is superlative and the body's gloss finish is free of imperfections.

tunes from the Great American Songbook using modern reharmonizations, including lots of closely voiced chords, the guitar has a brilliant clarity—nothing sounds even close to muddy.

I used the guitar when I transcribed the guitarist and luthier Buck Curran's "River Unto Sea," in an open Csus4 tuning (appropriately, as Curran is a former Bourgeois employee). The instrument loses none of its luster even when the sixth string is tuned down to C, and when I play the minimalist tune, with its repeating arpeggios, the guitar rings much like a piano.



Similar meticulousness is seen inside the guitar, where everything has been sanded and glued with great care and attention to detail.

A WINNER IN ALL STYLES

Specialists in country-blues, ragtime, and similar old-timey styles should find the L-DBO delivers the goods, sonically speaking. It's got that familiar midrange bark and is a terrific instrument for fingerpicking. But the guitar fares as well in a range of other contexts, both fingerpicked and with a plectrum. When I play

Whatever I play on the L-DBO, I'm wowed by the robustness of its sound, projection, and sustain. It's an addictive guitar to play—but not a cheap one. With a street price of around six grand, the guitar is much more expensive than its 1930s benchmarks. (In 1932, Gibson's L-00, for instance, had a list price of \$25, or \$439.14 in today's money.) Given its quality, sound, and adaptable personality, though, the L-DBO is a good investment for the discerning guitarist in search of the ultimate small-bodied companion. **AC**



AT A GLANCE

BOURGEOIS L-DBO

BODY

14-fret 00 body size

Aged Tone Adirondack red spruce top

Mahogany back and sides

Zircote bridge

Gloss sunburst finish

NECK

Mahogany

Zircote fretboard

25-inch scale

1 ²³/₃₂-inch nut

Waverly nickel tuners with ivoroid buttons

Satin finish

EXTRAS

Hide-glue construction

Hardshell case

PRICE

\$6,670 list/\$6,003 street

Made in the USA

bourgeoisguitars.net

A Plain Jane with Flair

The Martin GPC15ME is well-suited for a myriad of musical styles

BY PETE MADSEN

There is a certain familiarity to the Martin GPC15ME—the rustic charm of all mahogany guitars that have a log-cabin-type appeal can inspire a gutbucket response. However, this guitar, which is slightly larger than a Martin OM and equipped with an innovative pickup system, moves beyond the range of rustic and into a sound aesthetic that should appeal to the modern player.

The Grand Performance Cutaway (GPC) sports a satin finish all the way around, from the top, back, and sides to the modern C-shaped neck. With no binding, a single-ring rosette, vintage-style tuners, and unadorned styling, the GPC is a plain Jane that does not call too much attention to itself. But what it lacks in looks, it makes up for in sound and playability.

The GPC is well-suited for myriad styles, from big,

liked the way the GPC produced percussive timbres. Muting the strings, either with the palm or fretting hand, I could still keep a crisp snare-type of sound. This translates well to percussive taps on the strings with the picking hand, as well.

I switched to Travis-style fingerpicking on a couple of tunes: Mississippi John Hurt's "Satisfied and Tickled, Too" and Merle Travis' "Canonball Rag." I was getting a bit of fret buzz on the fourth string as I played an alternating bass pattern, but soon realized this was a function of my left-hand fingering, rather than some flaw in the guitar. I should note, though, that this GPC does play a little stiffer than I'm used to due

with a Performing Artist taper, has a modern C-shape and was easy to navigate. I played some bluesy single-string runs from nut to beyond the 17th fret—the cutaway gives you access to those electric guitar-type runs that often get stymied due to lack of frets. The 1 3/4-inch nut width and 2 5/32-inch string spacing at the bridge make the GPC a good compromise for both flatpickers and fingerpickers, although I would have preferred a little more space at the bridge V for fingerpicking.

CHECK UNDER THE HOOD

One of the GPC's cool features is the Fishman Matrix VT Enhance electronics system, which combines a Matrix undersaddle piezo pickup with a bridge-plate-mounted transducer.

I plugged

into a Schertler Jam 150 amp and was impressed by the volume and accuracy. The Enhance Transducer captures more of the percussive attack of the guitar top and strives to eliminate string noise and other unwanted handling noises from the guitar. The output jack is located just below the strap pin, where there's also a small port that houses the 9-volt battery for the onboard preamp. The control functions are mounted on the inside of the sound hole: Volume and tone are located at the top and the "enhance" dial on the bottom. (There are no large control box cavities carved out of the side of your guitar.)

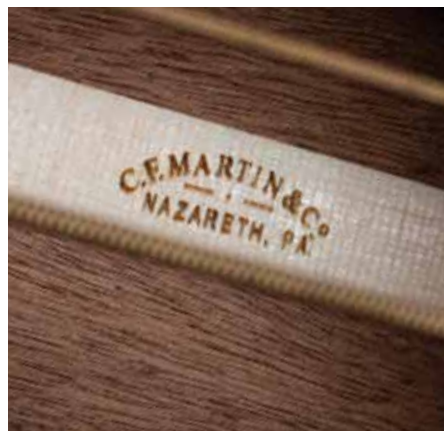
A small but pleasant additional feature is the control wheels, angled in a manner that makes it easier to reach inside the sound hole

full strumming to delicate fingerpicking. I strummed my way through Tom Petty's "Free Falling" and Dylan's "Lay, Lady, Lay," finding the mid-range punchy and bass almost brassy sound. I played some syncopated rhythms and

to its longer 25.4-inch scale length—it required a little more effort from my fretting hand to get a good sound. Once I straightened out my technique, the percussive thump I was getting from my alternating bass sounded great.

Returning to open D (DADF#AD), I played some slide inspired by Tampa Red's "Boogie Woogie Dance." The bark of the GPC drifted into resonator territory, giving sharp definition to slide-based phrases. I wouldn't say this guitar has an extremely warm or complex sound, but it does have a certain panache that will work for a down-home Americana sound.

The neck, designated as a modified low oval





and make adjustments without having to bury your head inside your guitar. The Enhance transducer turns the entire top of the guitar into a live pickup—great for tapping and other fingerstyle and percussive techniques. I also felt like the enhance dial functioned like a presence

I wouldn't say this guitar has an extremely warm or complex sound, but it does have a certain panache that will work for a down-home Americana sound.

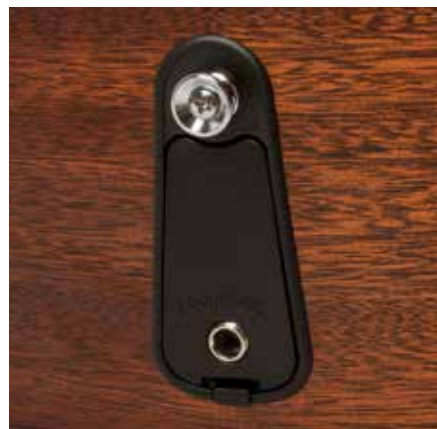


dial on an electric guitar amp: The guitar sound became brighter. And it increases the volume slightly.

All in all, the GPC is a great stage guitar that will allow you to get a wide range of sounds via the innovative pickup system. Its sound profile leans towards the brassy and percussive, which should make any rhythmically dynamic guitarist happy.

AG

Pictured L to R: Martin logo burned into bracing; volume and tone controls; Matrix enhance control; ebony bridge and endpins; output jack and battery compartment



AT A GLANCE

MARTIN GPC15ME

BODY

GP 14-fret cutaway

Top: Solid mahogany

Back and sides: Solid mahogany

Bracing: "X" scalloped, forward shifted

Bracing: $\frac{5}{16}$ -inch Sitka spruce

NECK

Solid mahogany

Modified low oval with high-performance taper

Simple dovetail neck joint

Fingerboard: Solid East Indian rosewood

Nut: Bone

Fingerboard width at nut: $1\frac{3}{4}$ -inch

String spacing at the bridge: $2\frac{5}{32}$ -inch

Scale length: 25.4-inches

No. of frets: 20:

No. of frets clear: 14

EXTRAS

Electronics: Matrix VT Enhance, NT2

Bridge and endpins: Solid black ebony

Tuners: Nickel open-gear w/ butterbean knobs

Finish: Satin

Hardshell case

PRICE

\$2,249 MSRP/\$1,799 street

Made in the USA

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Solid Gold

Ovation Guitar marks a milestone with a limited-edition icon

BY GREG CAHILL

Handcrafted at Ovation's newly reopened custom shop in New Hartford, Connecticut, the 50th Anniversary Limited-Edition Elite model is a joy to behold and to play.

The eye-catching gold-leaf epaulets, framing multiple soundholes and set against a slick black-gloss AAA solid bearclaw spruce top, signal the special status of this 14-fret beauty. To add comfort, the guitar's hand-laid Lyrachord mid-contour body has been modified from the rounded backs of traditional Ovation—the mid-contour back is slightly flattened to rest easily against the player's belly and the lower side also is leveled to sit comfortably on the thigh to enhance the playing experience. Its C-shaped curly maple neck and ten-inch-radius ebony fingerboard contribute to the guitar's effortless playability—the back of the headstock is carved to cradle the thumb when you're playing near the nut. The 12th fret is inlaid with the image of a phoenix to represent the rebirth of this iconic brand.

These thoughtful build qualities are impressive. But the real pleasure of the 50th Anniversary Limited-Edition Elite is its sound. The guitar is equipped with the company's proprietary OP Pro Studio preamp and OCP1 high-output pickup. Tuned to double-drop D (DADGBD), aka Neil Young's modal tuning, and plugged into Henriksen's diminutive The Bud combo amp, I get lost in a six-string reverie (call it noodling on steroids). The punchy bass, overall warmth, and infinite sustain range from a

rich, full bottom to chiming trebles and produce a revelatory playing experience.

I switch to standard tuning to play the Doors' raga-like "Indian Summer," an old favorite, and Neil Young's melancholy "Through My Sails," the fussy D6 and D4 figures readily accessible and the hammer-ons and pull-offs easy to execute on the radiused neck. Bliss. I switch to a fingerpicked version of Cream's take on Robert Johnson "Four Until Late" and Bob Dylan's rag-inspired "Peggy Day." The 1 11/16-inch-wide bone nut and string spacing overall is comfortable for fingerpicking, though I found the first string a tad too close to the edge of the fingerboard (not a deal breaker).

The sound is clean and balanced across the six strings. The frets are level and fret ends are unobtrusive.

A 12-fret slot-head version of this limited-edition Elite is also available. In the past months, Ovation has released 33 other new models, including an impressive AAA cedar-top 12-fret, slot-head Folklore model with 1 3/4-inch wide nut ideally suited to fingerpicking.

Drum Workshop, which purchased and subsequently relaunched Ovation, has retained the venerable brand's '70s mojo while bringing it into the modern era.

Kudos! **AC**

AT A GLANCE

OVATION 14-FRET 50TH ANNIVERSARY LIMITED-EDITION ELITE

BODY

AAA bearclaw spruce top
with black-gloss finish

Hand-laid Lyrachord
mid-contour body

Multiple soundholes

Gold leaf epaulets

Black ABS body binding
with gold-leaf metal purfling

NECK

Two-piece curly maple neck

10-inch-radius ebony fingerboard

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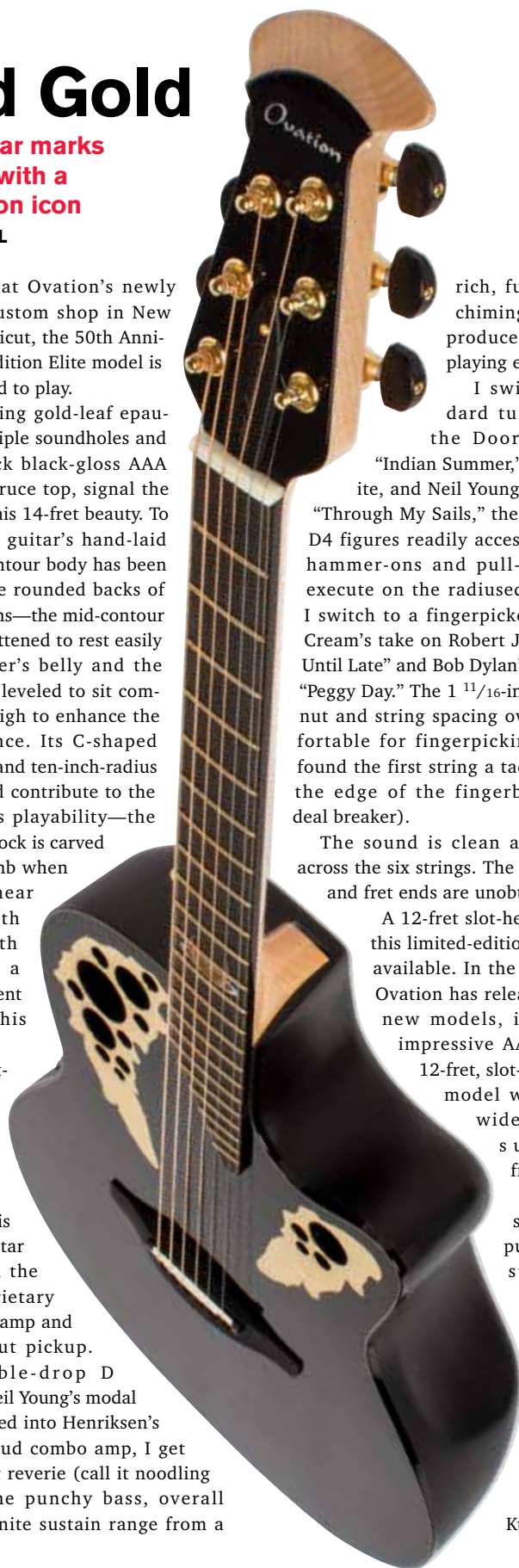
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NEW GEAR



Revamped Clamp

G7th Performance 2 Capo updates an already handy design

BY DENNIS GLOBUS

Smaller, faster, lighter. You'd think a company whose product is regularly voted "Best Capo of the Year" would leave well enough alone. But it didn't—instead, UK-based G7th took a great capo and made it an awesome one.

Whereas the original G7th Performance capo requires a backward press of the release lever, the Performance 2 operates with a forward push. While this may seem trivial, in everyday use it makes the Performance 2 even easier to operate one-handed than the original.

One thing I appreciate about the G7th Performance 2 capo is that it allows me to set the string tension quickly and easily. You just squeeze the capo to your desired tightness (the way you instinctively do it when playing a barre chord). This is in contrast to the ubiquitous spring-loaded capos that allow for no tension adjustments and can sometimes pull your strings sharp. The Performance 2 is also 25-percent smaller than the original, which makes wrapping your hand around the capo (as you would when playing a cowboy B7 chord) effortless.

OK, at this point you're saying to yourself, "I've already got half a dozen capos scattered around the house. Do I really need another one?" Simply put, yes. Emphatically yes. And

it's especially true if you gig, because the Performance 2 goes on so quickly and easily you won't have to fiddle with it onstage. Even more important is that you won't suffer any capo-related retuning.

At 30 bucks, the G7th Performance 2 capo isn't cheap. But when you see the quality of the materials and workmanship, plus the completely unique way this product works, you'll understand why. It's a guitar accessory that may very well outlive the guitar you bought it for. **AG**

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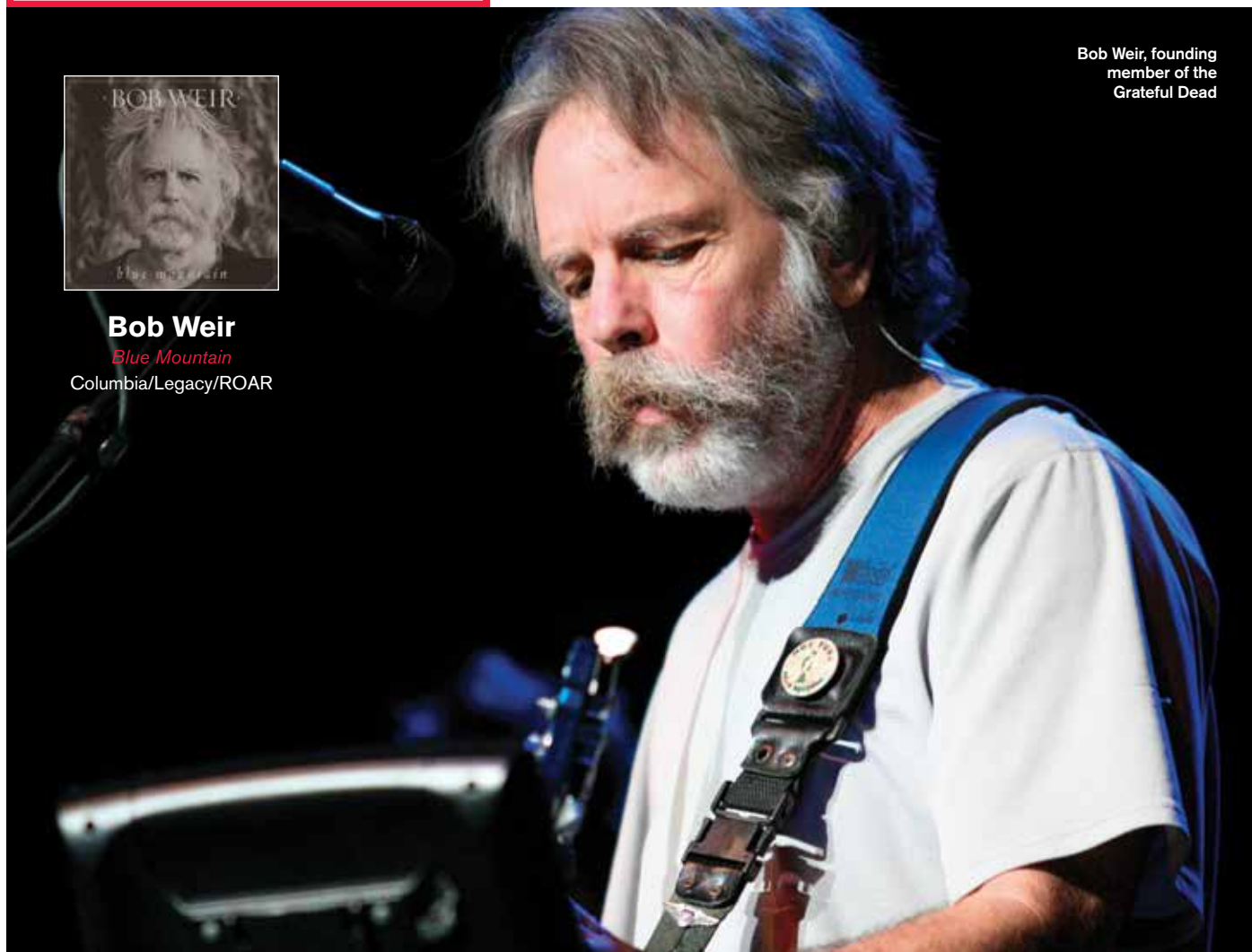


Bob Weir

Blue Mountain

Columbia/Legacy/ROAR

Bob Weir, founding
member of the
Grateful Dead



CRAIG ONEAL

Rockin' Mountain High

Bob Weir delivers a zenlike solo recording based on personal experience

BY GREG CAHILL

Bob Weir has let *Blue Mountain* simmer on a slow fire. This is the 68-year-old Grateful Dead vocalist and guitarist's first album in a decade and his first album of all new material in nearly 30 years. Inspired by his earlier experiences working on a ranch in Wyoming as a teenager (members of Old Crow Medicine Show reportedly urged him to source that experience for the narrative), Weir is joined by songwriting partner Josh Ritter, guitarists Aaron Dessner, Bryce Dessner of the National, and Steve Kimock as he reminisces about those times on 12 new songs. The *New York Times* has

hailed *Blue Mountain* as "an album of stately, autumnal, metaphysical cowboy songs . . . full of towns, women, and aspirations that have been long since left behind." And while there is a sense of longing for lost innocence, there's sometimes a celebratory mood as Weir surveys a mythic landscape populated by memories of a life rich in song.

Weir's earnest vocals soar on "Only a River," the album's sentimental opener. "Only a river's gonna make things right," he sings. And you sense that these vignettes occupy a profound, personal place on Weir's long,

strange trip. "Ghost Towns," tinged with a Western twang and sporting the refrain "I know what the ghost towns know, love comes and love goes," is rife with a melancholy in which Weir gazes across seven decades on the good and the bad.

On the title track, a somber solo-acoustic meditation, the mountain acts as a metaphor for life's sometimes insurmountable heights, but it also personifies a world filled with wonder. *Blue Mountain* resides in a state of mindful bliss—just what you'd expect from one of rock's wise elders.



John Prine

For Better, or Worse

Oh Boy

Country duets with a dash of levity

This is John Prine's first album of new studio tracks in nearly a decade. And that's a good thing. This follow up to 1999's critically acclaimed duet album *In Spite of Ourselves* (Oh Boy) finds the veteran singer-songwriter pairing off with Alison Krauss, Kacey Musgraves, Iris DeMent, Lee Ann Womack, Kathy Mattea, Miranda Lambert, Morgane Stapleton, Susan Tedeschi, Holly Williams, and his third wife, Fiona Prine, on a satisfying set of countrified meditations on love and marriage. At 70, Prine has lost none of his wit, sentimentality, or charm. And while ill health has ravaged his pipes, his gravelly vocals give him even more of a rascally quality.

The songs for the most part are lesser-known country fare by George Jones, Jessie Colter, Hank Williams, Joe Maphis, and others. The opening track, "Who's Gonna Take the Garbage Out," with DeMent, is a tongue-in-cheek take on domestic incompatibility. The mood turns tender on "Falling in Love Again," featuring Krauss. Tedeschi exercises her inner-Tammy Wynette on the George Jones classic "Color of the Blues." The fiddle and pedal-steel-driven "I'm Tellin' You," with Holly Williams, is hayride ready. And Lambert is fittingly feisty on a cover of the Flatt & Scruggs honky-tonk chestnut "Dim Lights, Thick Smoke (and Loud, Loud Music)."

For Better, or Worse reminds you how much fun country music can be when a rocky relationship is treated with a dash of levity. Prine supplies his own encore, a whimsical, folksy, acoustic version of Hank William's bachelor's lament "Just Waitin'."

—G.C.



Courtney Hartman

Nothing We Say

Courtney Hartman

Personal and pensive, the Della Mae guitarist goes solo

On the title track of *Nothing We Say*, Courtney Hartman's cottony croon flutters in free fall: "The touch of my hand says more than the words that slip my mind." To listeners familiar with the Della Mae guitarist's nimble flat-picking, this seems a promise of what to expect from her solo debut—fluid guitar lines that convey meanings deeper than words.

Hartman wrote four of the five songs on this EP, and her lyrics dance in tandem with her guitar work, with which they share equal significance. Liquid and bell-toned, Hartman's archtop spins whirlpooling loops, while simultaneously laying down a swaying, staggered rhythm on "When You See the Morning." The music's cozy sense of dislocation bolsters a jet-lag-fueled reverie, a memory of romance that dissipates like morning mist as Hartman's music-box banjo rolls in.

Elsewhere, Hartman defies expectations. She transforms "Cumberland Gap" from a traditional bluegrass barnburner into a hushed meditation. Here Hartman deftly picks out contrapuntal melodies and cross rhythms on her parlor guitar.

"Hide and Seek" marries a gentle melody to a disturbing fable, in which children pretend to play the titular game while they run away from an abusive parent.

With this lyrical set, the first from a Della Mae member since the band's 2015 self-titled album, Hartman cements her reputation as a distinctive guitar stylist, and ups her game as a songwriter who delights and disturbs. Personal and pensive, *Nothing We Say* speaks volumes.

—Pat Moran



Hot Club of San Francisco

John Paul George & Django

Hot Club

Django meets the Fab Four on this fanciful Gypsy jazz outing

This is such a great idea, it's amazing no one has tried it until now: an entire CD of Django Reinhardt/Gypsy-jazz-style arrangements of Beatles songs. In the capable hands of AG contributor Paul Mehling's Hot Club of San Francisco quintet (three guitars, bass, violin), and occasional guests on everything from drums to saxophone to barrel organ, this works equally well as a swinging jazz disc and an imaginative, unpredictable, and highly satisfying excursion to some interesting corners of the Beatles' vast catalog. Instead of the usual parade of obvious hits, HCSF has opted to explore what it can do with such (slightly) less-known tunes as "I Will" and "Julia" from *The White Album*, "Things We Said Today" (which opens sounding like "Fever"), "You Can't Do That" (with banjo!), "Because" (with a tango middle eight), and even the relatively obscure 1963 George Harrison tune "Don't Bother Me." Isabelle Fontaine sings lead on a sultry version of "For No One," and the other vocal piece, Harrison's underrated "If I Needed Someone," is sung in French—a very nice touch.

The Django influence flows easily throughout—in Mehling's fluid and expressive guitar leads, the comping rhythm guitars, the interplay of Evan Price's violins, and arrangements that sound like they were cribbed from a smoky club in Paris' Montmartre district in the late 1930s. There's even an actual Django-Beatles fusion—a wonderful instrumental co-mingling of "Hey Jude" and Reinhardt's "Duke and Dukie." It's a CD full of surprises and unexpected musical treats at every turn.

—Blair Jackson

TOP 5 AMERICANA ALBUMS

1. *For Better, Or Worse*
John Prine
(Oh Boy/
Thirty Tigers)

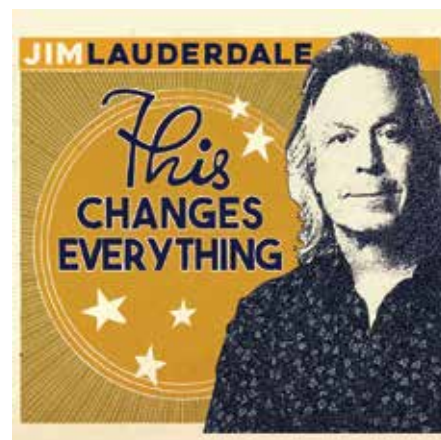
2. *Swimmin' Pools, Movie Stars...*
Dwight Yoakam
(Sugar Hill/
Concord)

3. *Little Seeds*
Shovels & Rope
(New West)

4. *Schmilco*
Wilco
(Anti-Epithaph)

5. *American Band*
Drive-By Truckers
(ATO)

Source: americanaradio.org, week of October 24



Jim Lauderdale

This Changes Everything
Sky Crunch

Singer-songwriter revisits 11 of his songs covered by others

This isn't the first rodeo for the dancehall shuffles, two-steps, and rave-ups collected on *This Changes Everything*, Jim Lauderdale's love letter to a distinctly Texas-flavored brand of country. The singer-songwriter originally wrote or co-wrote these 11 tunes for several country artists, including Ed Burleson and George Strait. Many of these songs became classics on their first swing-through. For the most part, they pack more punch here.

Rolling on the ringing strum of John Carroll's and producer Tommy Detamore's acoustic guitars and Lauderdale's warm croon, "All the Rage in Paris," a sentimental remembrance of honky-tonk gigging, boasts more spontaneity here than on the Derailers' 2001 version. The percussive bite of Carroll's cantering acoustic, plus the velvety gravitas of Lauderdale's vocal on "It All Started and Ended with You," renders Burleson's original callow in comparison.

Only "We Really Shouldn't be Doing This" fails to transcend the quicksilver exuberance that enlivens its first incarnation. With an amiable drawl, syncopated percussion and stuttering rockabilly acoustics, Lauderdale and his Austin session crew come close, but they can't quite catch the giddy recklessness of George Strait's hit version.

To each tune—be it breezy swing, acoustic jazz, or burnished countrypolitan—Lauderdale brings concise pop structure. He's been doing it for decades, blending disparate genres with the insouciance of an off-the-grid alchemist, yet he's still better known as a songwriter than as an interpreter or performer. If there's any justice, *This Changes Everything* will change that. —RM.



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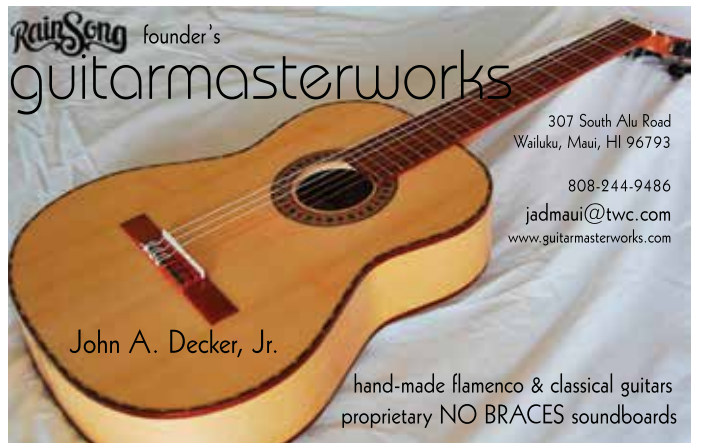


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Jeff Tweedy performs during the 2015 Forecastle Music Festival in Louisville, Kentucky.



STEPHEN J. COHEN / GETTY IMAGES

A Depression-Era Wonder

This Gibson-built Kel Kroydon 'Birds' model is a Jeff Tweedy fave

BY GREG CAHILL

When Jeff Tweedy went looking for a vintage axe in late September to show off on *Late Night with Stephen Colbert*, he brought a Kel Kroydon (which sounds like a character from the 1956 sci-fi classic *Forbidden Planet*). He's not the only one to be drawn to the KK's old-school mojo: When Collings Guitars introduced its affordable Waterloo brand a few years ago, the Texas guitar company turned to a Kel Kroydon as the basis

for its Depression-era inspired 12-fret WL-K.

Kel Kroydon, built between 1929 and '31, was manufactured by Gibson Guitars as a budget item to help that venerable company boost sales after the 1929 collapse of the Wall Street stock market. The short-lived brand soon disappeared into the ether. But during its brief reign, the company produced three models: the KK1 (listed in its catalog as a tenor), KK2, and KK3. The 00-size KK1 "Birds" model makes

frequent appearances with Tweedy at his Wilco shows. He's not alone in his admiration. A report in Reverb.com recently noted: "A Kel Kroydon KK1 acoustic is a 'holy-grail guitar for the most accomplished fingerstyle pickers,' according to Vintage Licks Guitars, a vintage-instrument dealer. 'It is a Depression-era wonder, essentially the equal of a 1930, 12-fret Gibson L1, without the adjustable truss rod . . . Not many survivors are left.'" **AG**

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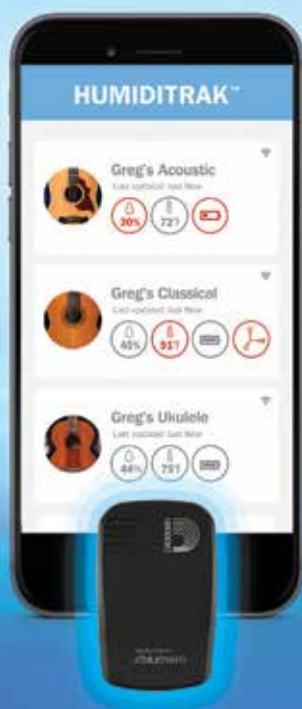
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